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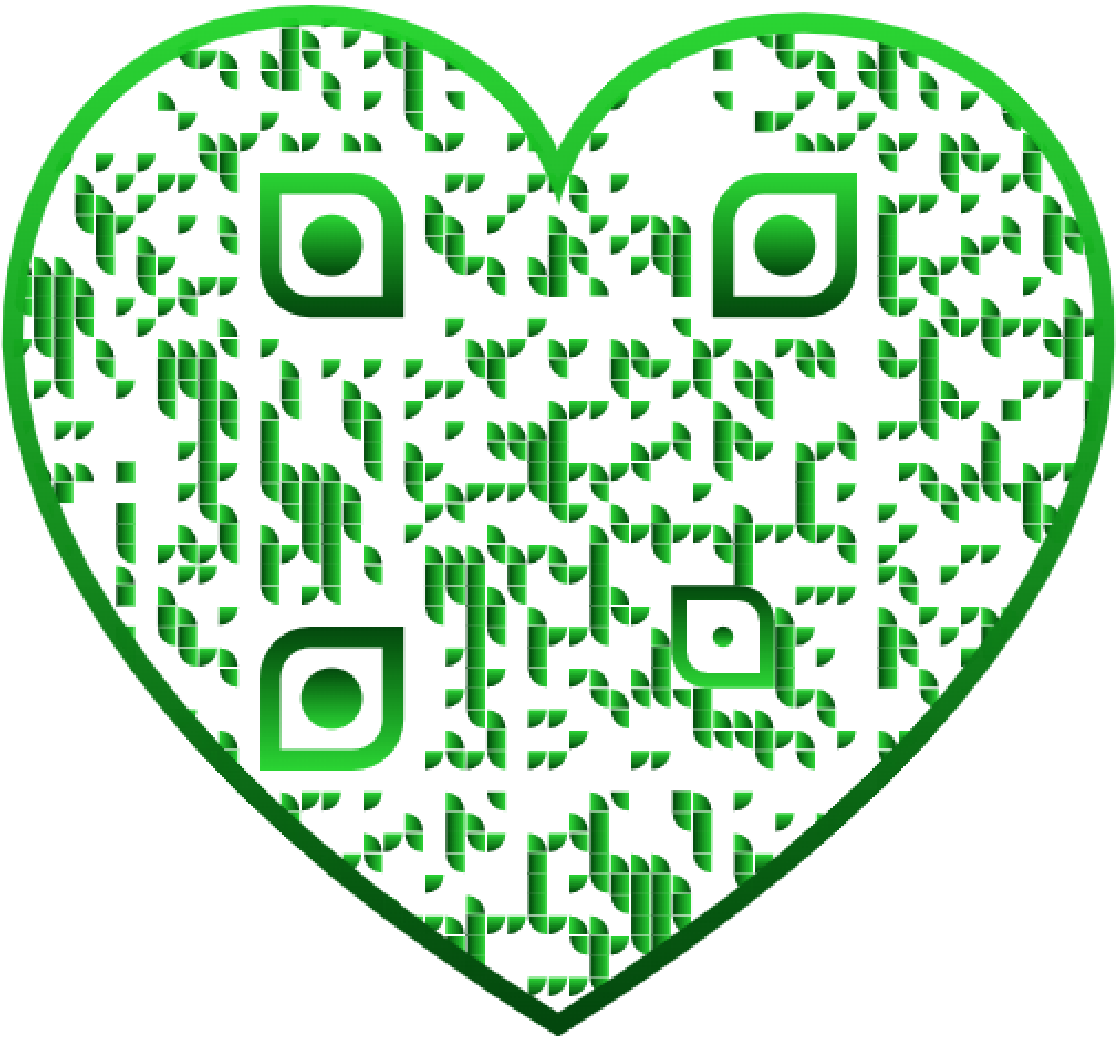

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THE ROOT NOTE

In conversations with readers of *Acoustic* it would appear that, broadly speaking, you fall into one of two groups: the traditionalists or the modernists.

The traditionalists are all about vintage, pre-war instruments and construction techniques, while the modernists embrace new technologies, materials and innovation. In preparing this issue of *Acoustic*, I got to thinking that perhaps the position which yields the most reward is to have a foot in both camps.

Looking at some of the gear we've reviewed and featured in this month's issue we seem to have gone from one extreme to the other. On the one hand we take a look at an extraordinary, one-off guitar built by the Santa Cruz Guitar Company using carbon-dated 8,000-year-old oak for the back and sides, and 3,000-year-old spruce for the soundboard. I can't recall another guitar with such a history. I mean, depending on who you listen to, the wood for this guitar could predate civilisation itself!

Then, at the other extreme, in the form of the Roadie and Acoustajam, we profile some very clever new products that use Bluetooth, state of the art mobile devices and apps. Both are real finds and show just how much fun it can be when we are willing to adopt and welcome the benefits of modern technology.

Perhaps the lesson is to be willing to take the best of everything the market has to offer. For example, what's wrong with retro-fitting a vintage Martin D-28 with a Bluetooth-enabled device? I accept that the very thought itself takes a little time to process but maybe it's good to challenge what we've become accustomed to from time to time?

Whatever camp your foot finds itself in, we hope you enjoy the issue.

Steve

Steve Harvey
Editor

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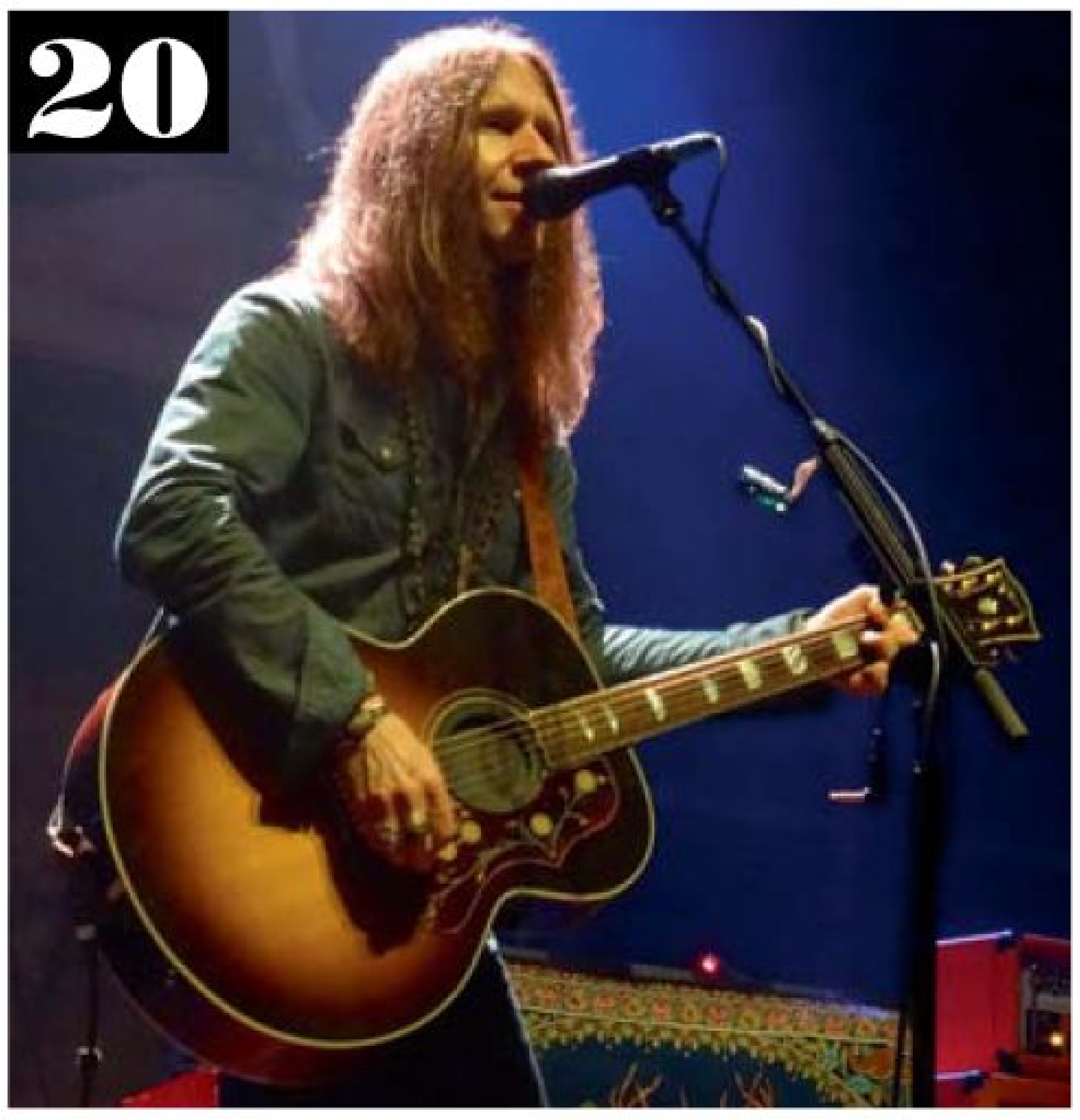

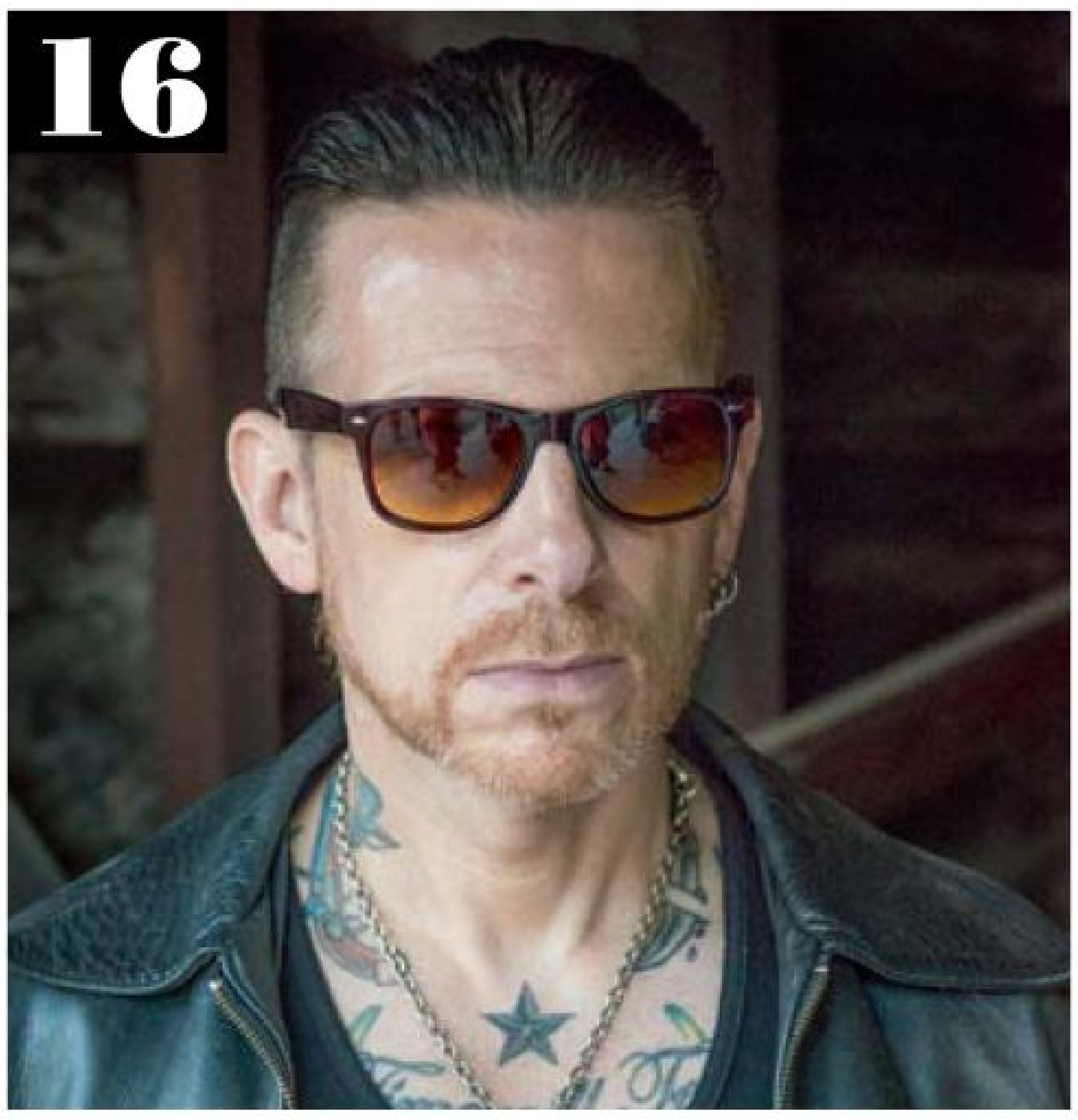

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KEEPING THE FAITH

Faith Guitars has announced the addition of several chart-topping new musician endorsements to their ranks, with guitarists from alternative rockers Mallory Knox and Eliza and the Bear now using their products.

James Gillett and Sam Douglas from Mallory Knox (*pictured below*), who have recently released their second studio album, *Assymetry*, and toured with Biffy Clyro, have chosen to use Faith HiGloss Saturn Electro Cutaway (FSCEHG) and Faith HiGloss Venus Electro Cutaway (FVHG) models for all of their live and studio acoustic duties from now on.

Martin Dukelow, guitarist for critically acclaimed UK indie five-piece Eliza and the Bear has chosen a Faith Mahogany Gloss Neptune Electro Cutaway (FNCEMG) model for future touring. His band Eliza and the Bear will release their debut self-titled album in April 2016.

http://www.malloryknox.com
http://www.elizaandthebear.com

KATE RUSBY AND STRAWBS TO HEADLINE BEVERLEY

The Beverley Folk Festival organisers are promising fans that the 2016 event will be both bigger and better value for money than ever before, with significant pricing changes and a greater range of stages.

Headliners at the yearly event, which takes place at the Beverley Racecourse from 17-19 June, will include multi-award winning Kate Rusby and her band, Steeleye Span, Tim Edey and popular current act, The Young'uns.

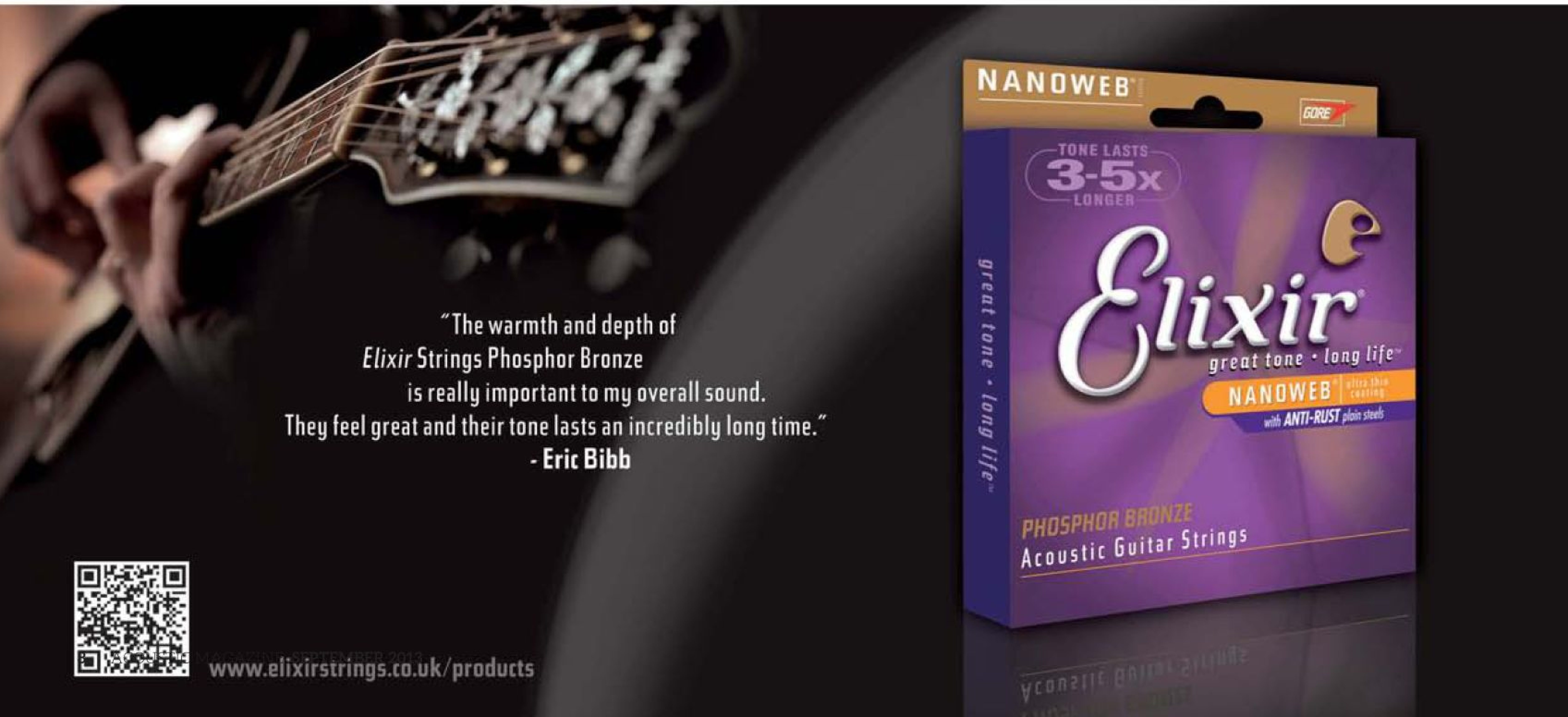
At 33 years old, the festival is known for its eclectic mix of traditional English, Celtic and Americana music, combining current favourites and more established acts.

The 'Legends' bill will have a Geordie twang this year with a 'Tyne Treasures' concert, featuring Lindisfarne founder members Ray Laidlaw and Billy Mitchell performing iconic album, *Fog on the Tyne*, as well as fellow Geordies Animals & Friends, and Durham-born singer-songwriter, Jez Lowe. Other highlights will include the Acoustic Strawbs, known for their song 'Part of the Union'.

Crossing the pond, the festival will reinforce its reputation for attracting top Americana acts, with US bands Billy Lee and the Swamp Critters, Wild Ponies, the Goat Roper Rodeo Band, the D'Urbervilles from Leeds and King Courgette from York gracing the stage.

Basic ticket policy will still be based on a £115 overall weekend ticket and £50 day tickets, but the festival board have largely abandoned the previous price structure with its charges for individual events, instead issuing half day and evening-only tickets.

For more info visit ***www.beverleyfestival.com***



ALL-MAHOGANY CORTS

South Korea's Cort Guitars has introduced three all-mahogany versions of some of their most popular existing acoustic guitars. The new AF510M model is an all mahogany version of the popular AF510, designed for robust sound in a compact concert size body. The SFX-MEM features a slim body shape and single cutaway, highlighted by white binding and white pearl acryl rosette, with Cort's proprietary preamp CE304T also onboard. Finally, the AD-Mini M model is a three-quarter size all-'hog acoustic engineered for players who prefer a smaller sized guitar for their unique tones and playability.
For more information, visit
www.cortguitars.com

MORE PLUCK FOR YOUR BUCK

Barnes and Mullins has confirmed the addition of DR's ultra-durable Veritas Acoustic string range to its catalogue. Veritas strings are phosphor bronze and boast DR's patented Accurate Core Technology (ACT) to strengthen and perfect any variations of the core wire for greatly improved pitch and longevity. Claiming to last up to four times longer than standard types, Veritas strings are ideal for gigging guitarists who require the use prolonged life strings but could do without that having an impact on tone and pitch quality.

"I can play four or more concerts with one set of Veritas. I used to play one concert with other strings," notes guitarist Stefan Grossman. For more info, visit: ***http://www.bandm.co.uk***

BACK TO SCHOOL

Rockschool – the world's leading examination board for contemporary musicians – has released a brand new acoustic guitar syllabus and interactive course materials. The syllabus contains tracks from Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles, Taylor Swift, Ed Sheeran, Pat Metheny, Newton Faulkner, Brent Mason and Tommy Emmanuel, and combines modern hits with classic tunes.

Nik Preston, head of product development and publishing at Rockschool Ltd, said: "As always, authenticity is uppermost in our minds when developing any new syllabus. With Rockschool Acoustic, any guitar student can choose their repertoire from a diverse array of artists."

Rockschool Acoustic Guitar are available in digital format from the RSL Shop and in-store now. To find out more, visit: ***www.rslawards.com/acoustic.***

ARDS INTERNATIONAL GUITAR FESTIVAL 2016

Northern Ireland's Ards International Guitar Festival has announced an impressive mix of international artists for this year's event.

From the 6-10 April, Newtownards will play host to acts such as legendary folk guitarist Martin Carthy, Canadian maestro Antoine Dufour, classical Polish artist Wiktoria Szubelak and blues rocker Grainne Duffy.

Luthiery fans will get the chance to enjoy tours of the Avalon guitar factory and pedal building workshops, while players of all abilities will be able to attend intimate guitar clinics from experts in the field.

For ticket details and full programme, which also includes some free events, visit: ***www.ardsguitarfestival.co.uk***

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POST: Complete the form, below, tear off and send FAO Acoustic Magazine / Manuel Rodriguez comp to Blaze Publishing, Lawrence House, Morrell Street, Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, CV32 5SZ. Closing date for the Manuel Rodriguez competition is 8 April 2016. The winner will be announced shortly afterwards.

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ASK THE EXPERTS

DON'T GET LOST IN A SEA OF ACRONYMS. THE MU IS HERE TO EXPLAIN ALL…

It's a long-running joke that our industry has too many acronyms and that no one knows what they mean. Near the top of the list, up there with PRS, ASCAP, PPL and BMI, is MCPS.

MCPS provides £140 million worth of income to songwriters, composers and publishers each year. It has well over 26,000 members, and has been around since 1911.

BUT WHAT DOES MCPS ACTUALLY DO?

MCPS stands for Mechanical Copyright Protection Society. It distributes mechanical royalties, which are paid to songwriters, composers and publishers when copies have been made of pieces of music they have contributed to. Those copies can be a CD sale, syncronisation into a TV programme, a DVD or one download from a website such as iTunes.

Streaming services make various copies in the process of music being played via their platforms. Acts of copying include when a track is buffered on the internet or sent via satellite, or if someone saves a stream to their laptop for offline playback.

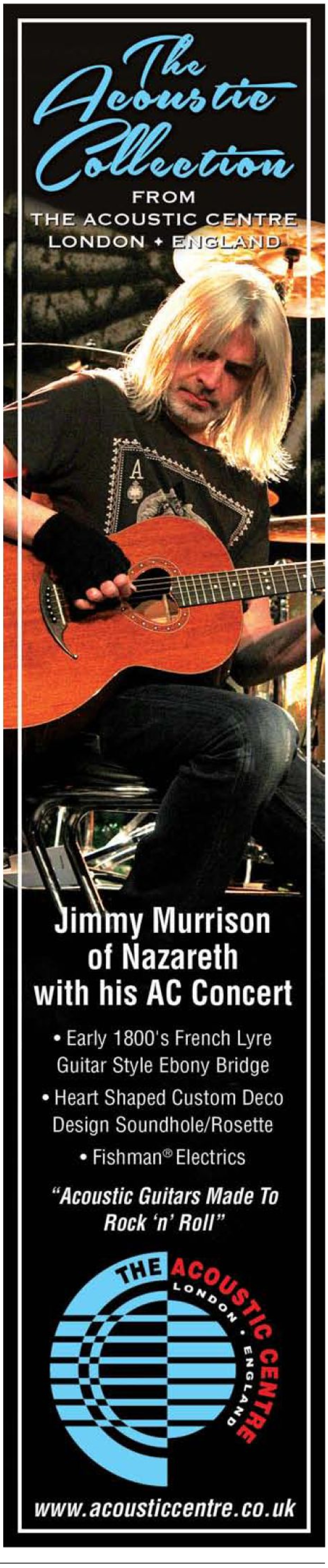
All of this applies regardless of who is singing your song – if someone else sings it and makes a copy, that's another act of copying.

To make a copy of a song, whoever wants to make the copy needs to buy a mechanical licence. That money is paid back to MCPS members, whether through publishers or directly to songwriters/composers themselves.

Individual royalties can be really small, making them expensive for a publisher to collect. MCPS traces and collects all the tiny sums of money on publishers' and songwriters' behalves. It might sound like a small and trivial job, but those small payments add up to give MCPS that £140 million turnover.

For songwriters who don't have publishers, MCPS licenses its members' repertoire in one go via negotiated agreements with the record industry, digital services and broadcasters. You can join directly for £50. We can offer advice if you're trying to decide between direct membership or working through a publisher.

If you're thinking about it, or have questions about any other aspect of your career (including those pesky acronyms), get in touch with your Musicians' Union Regional Office via theMU.org/contact. ■



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JOHN MORELAND

Having recently released new album High on Tulsa Heat, the acclaimed solo singer-songwriter is bringing his new tunes to UK soil on tour with Jason Isbell. We hung out to chat hardcore music, songwriting and modern acoustic guitars

WORDS: MORGAN MATTHEWS **IMAGES:** BIG MOUTH PUBLICITY

I catch John Moreland not long after he has arrived in Bristol, relaxing upstairs at the venue he is playing that evening to a thousand-plus strong crowd. I wonder what the softly spoken, tattooed Oklahoman is hoping for? "Well if people give me some shit in between songs, that's OK most of the time," he laughs, "but then sometimes I'm in the mind-set of wanting a quietly attentive crowd. Sometimes when you play to a quiet crowd, it can feel really electric, you know? But if it's a dead crowd, that's when you want something to fight against." With three dates left on his first ever UK tour, I wonder how the quiet gauge has been over here. "Well, the crowds over here have been pretty much the same as back home," he answers, "which is kind of surprising, because people told me it would be really different. But it's been great, and the crowds have all been the good quiet kind."

The Academy venue is a big stage to take to alone with just an acoustic guitar for company, but John is unfazed. "I've been playing big stages for years by myself and opening for big, loud bands, so it doesn't worry me in the least", he says casually. "I mean, there are some songs on the album that I won't play in tonight's set; full band songs on the record like 'Sad Baptist Rain', because it won't work as well, but some like 'Losing Sleep Tonight' or 'Heart's Too Heavy' I'll play. I'll approach them a little differently, because I'm obviously taking away instruments, but when you play solo I find you can use silence and space as an instrument. It's also easier to be dynamic when you're solo, which is good, because I like reworking some of the songs that way."

High on Tulsa Heat, his new record, is very much a solo effort, with John playing the majority of the instruments on there and a few friends dotted about across the tracks. Are the songs written for solo playing? "No, not really, because usually when I write songs I'm thinking about the band sound and how I'm going to record them. That just comes from engineering my own songs; I'm always thinking about how it will come across on record, and it's only after that I'll think about bringing it live, which means just doing it a few times to understand how it's going to work. I usually play it exactly as on the record the first few times, just without the other instruments, and slowly with each show it morphs into something different, once you've worked it out a bit."

The album itself was less a gradual process than a spontaneous snap decision. "This one was a shotgun recording," he confirms. "My parents were out of town for a couple of weeks and I had a bunch of songs written, so I just called up my buddies John [Calvin Abney] and Jared [Tyler], who both play on *Tulsa Heat* and said 'do you guys wanna make a record, like right now?' So we set up in my parents' house and recorded for four days, which is pretty much the album. I tend to like recording really fast and then stepping back and breathing and considering what we've made. I like to get something I can live with and then move on. I think that approach comes from recording in expensive studios with bands when I was younger; we would save our money from summer jobs and get in these studios; you really can't nit-pick when it's costing that much!"

The bands mentioned above were in fact punk and hardcore groups, which John wrote songs for and played in from around 13 until 19 years old. "I just got kind of bored of it in the end", he says. "I was immersed in that scene and playing in lots of bands, and I just burned out. I wanted to find music to feel excited about again, and it was what I grew up with, like Steve Earle and Guy Clarke, that really got me into it again." It's quite a genre shift; it must have been a distinct change in songwriting too, I suggest. "The change made me better," he replies immediately. "And it's because when I decided I was going to play by myself and acoustic, I knew I had to really get serious and I couldn't half-ass anything. There's nothing to hide behind in this genre; your weaknesses are exposed. But, more than that, with the guys I grew up with, it seemed that their songwriting came from a different

impulse to mine. In the bands I was in, it was quite a utilitarian approach to writing, and I soon started realising that songwriting was bigger than that. Now it's an important part of my life. I guess it always was, but there's more acknowledgement now and it's something I have to do to feel like a normal person."

The songs John writes are self-reflective, introspective pieces; there is a sense of lyrical catharsis when you listen to a Moreland album. "Well, I grew up listening to artists like David Bazan and Chris Knight and guys like that," he begins. "Guys who wrote these big epic folk tales, like David Bazan's song about a guy who cheats on his wife and she finds out and kills him. And Chris Knight would write all these songs about people robbing liquor stores and stuff like that, so I tried to do that sort of thing and I just always felt like I was full of shit! It was all a lot more exciting than my life, maybe, but once I had this kind of epiphany and I began writing about just being alive and in your mid-twenties and unsure of yourself, it just felt right, you know? When I was writing these big narrative songs, I felt this sense of paranoia that people would know I was faking it and it wasn't me." He pauses a moment. "I think they probably would have known, too."

Some common themes in John's work, as with many of the itinerant singers trying to make it happen in the expanse of the States at the moment, are the sense of place and home, and the anxieties surrounding those subjects. "I think *Tulsa Heat* in particular deals with those matters," he agrees. "I travel a lot and it really can make you feel quite lost and like you're floating around. I also just moved to a different town, so that's meant some figuring out of how to fit in and issues of where home is and what I want it to be." He stops and smiles for a few moments. "I actually think I'm starting to get more of a grasp on the whole thing these days," he laughs, "although I still don't know what my songs are actually about!"

Travelling with John on this tour is his new Martin, which I can see gleaming in its open hardcase, on the sofa beside the singer. "This is my Martin D-28," he smiles, reaching across to grasp the neck. "I just got it recently, so it's pretty perfect now, but I'm on tour for a while, so it'll get beat up pretty good, I think. I used to have one of the X Series Martins and I toured with that for years – it was the only guitar I could afford. I like this D-28 to tour with, but I don't love it for recording quite so much. On the other records I used my dad's '51 00-18, which is amazing, but I'm not quite as in love with this one for recording with." A vintage Martin sounds like a pretty hard act to follow to me. "Yeah, maybe you're right," he laughs. "But for live stuff this one's really good; the Fishman Matrix works well and it's just a solid workhorse that sounds really good plugged in, like a lot of these modern guitars, I suppose." ■

***High on Tulsa Heat* is out now on Old Omens**

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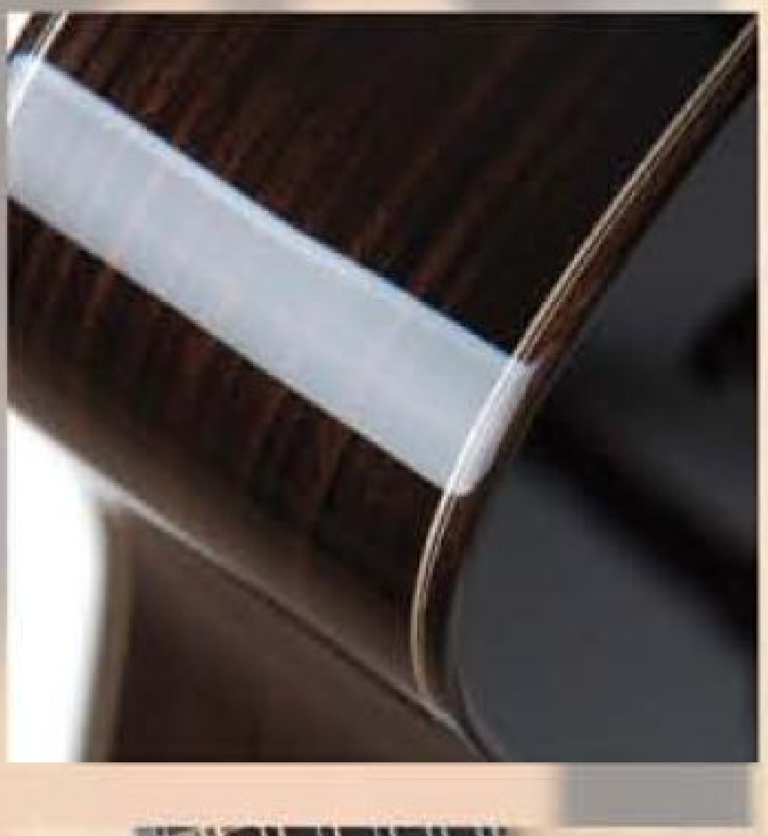
Acoustic Magazine
August 2015



RICKY WARWICK

Black Star Riders frontman and renowned solo artist Ricky Warwick tells Joel McIver about life in the acoustic zone

WORDS: JOEL MCIVER **IMAGES:** NUCLEAR BLAST RECORDS UK

Born in Northern Ireland, raised in Scotland and globally trained in the ways of rock'n'roll thanks to a career in two successful bands, you'd expect singer-songwriter Ricky Warwick to prefer electric guitars to acoustics. After all, making an unsociably loud racket is exactly what his bands the Almighty and later Thin Lizzy – now touring under a new name, Black Star Riders – are famous for. But no – being unplugged is Warwick's preferred state, as he tells us on the brink of releasing a double album, half electric and half acoustic. *When Patsy Cline Was Crazy (And Guy Mitchell Sang The Blues)* is the title of the former, *Hearts On Trees* the latter, already in the shops.

"I've always played acoustic since I started making solo records 12 years ago," the great man tells us. "Way before I was in Thin Lizzy, that was what I did, so it's nothing new for me. This time, we had a lot of songs, and I didn't want to trim them down to 10 songs for one album, so I thought it would be fun to do one acoustic record and one electric record."

Hearts On Trees – which features guests such as Joe Elliott (Def Leppard), Andy Cairns (Therapy?), Jake Burns (Stiff Little Fingers) and Richard Fortus (Guns N' Roses) – combines Warwick's Celtic and Americana influences for a sound that is both sensitive and hard-hitting, which sounds like a contradiction but works perfectly.

Still, a quick recap of Warwick's career reveals why the acoustic might be thought of as an unusual choice for his main instrument. After all, he made his bones with a brief stint in punks New Model Army in the late 1980s before forming the Almighty, a full-on hard rock and metal band that toured the planet throughout the following decade with headbangers such as Metallica, Motörhead, Iron Maiden, Megadeth and Alice Cooper. However, in the great tradition of rockers who play acoustic (see Frank Turner), going unplugged lends great depth to a band, no matter how heavy they may be.

"Number one, acoustic is great to write on because it's the truest form of writing: you know that if something sounds good on an acoustic guitar, when you add a full band it's going to sound amazing," explains Warwick. "The other thing is that it's nice to sit the acoustic behind an electric guitar, as almost another rhythmic effect: it just makes it sound fuller. I use that a lot in Black Star Riders, for songs like 'Whiskey In The Jar', 'Killer Instinct' and 'Bound For Glory'. It beefs up the sound and gives it a really full tone."

When the Almighty finally called it a day – the occasional reunion show notwithstanding – in 2000 or so, it was the acoustic guitar that saved Warwick from the inevitable post-split depression. He did his first acoustic tour in 2002, at a point when most of his fans might justifiably have expected him to form an electric band instead, and immediately won a following. Seven years later the reformed Thin Lizzy – featuring the legendary Scott Gorham on guitar – invited him on board as frontman, and his solo and band careers have existed in parallel since then. Switching the name to Black Star Riders in 2012 did the group no harm at all.

"Black Star Riders is going from strength to strength," he says, when asked how his

day-job supergroup is getting on. "Obviously we took a gamble by changing the name from Thin Lizzy: people wondered what we were doing, but it was really the best thing we ever did. I have complete respect for Lizzy and I think the fans understood and agreed, and obviously here we are on tour right now with Def Leppard. The singles have done really well, with lots of radio play, so we're in a good place and we're happy that the band is starting to establish itself on its own."

You'll see Warwick wielding some tasty acoustic gear in his various incarnations. As he tells us, "I use Avalons, and have done for the last 12 years. They're made in my home town of Newtownards, and handbuilt for me by Ernie McMillan over there, who is fantastic. As anyone who has seen me play will know, I'm not too gentle with my guitars: I beat the hell out of them! I had a

"Obviously we took a gamble by changing the name from Thin Lizzy... [but] I think the fans understood"

Gibson J-200 acoustic before these, which was lovely, and I had a Gibson Hummingbird too, but I found that the Avalons could take the beating that I dish out to them. And they sound fantastic as well, they're beautifully made guitars.

"I mike them up in the studio: I never go straight into the desk. That way you get the sound of the room as well. Live, I use Fishman pickups, usually into a DI box or sometimes into a little Marshall acoustic amp that I take with me. I use a feedback buster that you can get in any shop. It works really well. We tune down half a step, and the string gauge is pretty thick. I just put on my 13s, and I'm ready for battle!" ■

***When Patsy Cline Was Crazy (And Guy Mitchell Sang The Blues)/Hearts On Trees* is out now on Nuclear Blast Entertainment.**
Info: www.rickywarwick.com, www.blackstarriders.com

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CHARLIE STARR

Blackberry Smoke's Charlie Starr fills us in on the band's new album Holding All The Roses

WORDS: TERI SACCONE **IMAGES:** JOHN K SMITH

Blackberry Smoke are an Atlanta, USA band who span the range from glistening acoustic numbers to blistering rock anthems. Although they've drawn comparisons with Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers, the band follow their own template with their soulful acoustic-laden blues-rock.

The Smoke have been toiling away since 2004. But it was 2012's *The Whippoorwill* that truly cemented the quintet as a force to be reckoned with. Bluegrass harmonies and visceral fingerpicking abound on tracks such as 'Man Of Constant Sorrow', 'Six Ways To Sunday' and 'Ain't Much Left Of Me'. Blackberry Smoke are road dogs, playing 250 shows per year, and are beloved in the UK where they first broke through.

At the Smoke's nucleus is Charlie Starr: guitarist, songwriter and singer in that order, specified by the man himself, who spoke to *Acoustic* at his home in Georgia to discuss the finer points of their latest release *Holding All The Roses*, and the enormous presence that the acoustic guitar has within the band and Charlie's life.

Blackberry Smoke tend to diversify their sounds on albums, using different textures, moods and approaches to keep things interesting. What were their stylistic goals for *Holding All The Roses*?

"I think variety. The song 'Holding All The Roses' may be the heaviest thing we've ever recorded," Starr offers. "It's kind of frenetic and crazy, the way it kind of stops and starts and goes from electric to acoustic to electric to acoustic again. And then 'No Way Back To Eden' is probably the most mellow song we've ever recorded. It's a really vibe-y song, you know? So that's where I was coming from with that. I wanted to keep things going from one extreme to another."

They had Brendan O'Brien producing this one, who has a decidedly rock clientele including Pearl Jam and Springsteen. "What you may not be aware of is that Brendan is a legendary guitar player in Atlanta and it's funny that he went on to become such a successful producer because he's a truly great guitarist who could have had a huge career as a player had he stayed in that realm."

> **"'No Way Back to Eden' is probably the most mellow song we've ever recorded. It's a really vibe-y song"**

They are all indigenous Southerners in this band, which is reflected in the elements of bluegrass in their music.

"We all grew up listening to that kind of music," he says. "I started singing in church, so I think a little gospel flavour filters through, too. We like to mix it up and take some chances."

Charlie concurs that most of his songs originate on acoustic guitar. "I'm a guitar player first and foremost and from time to time a song will come by via an electric guitar. But if so, then I'll finish it on the acoustic guitar, usually at home, because being on the road revolves around the show. But when I have song ideas on tour it all coalesces once I get home. So I usually start on acoustic and if not I normally finish with one."

Lyric ideas come to him through both the sacred and profane aspects of life both at home and on tour.

"Everyday experiences and living fuels lyric ideas," he says. "Religious imagery is still powerful to me and I was lucky enough to be brought up in the bible belt where Christianity is predominant and kinda scary. Baptists sorta make it that way. It teaches kids to do the right thing by scaring the shit outta them. I've used some of that in my lyrics because it's become part of who I am. So I keep ideas in a notebook I carry around with me every day.

"I know it's all been said lyrically by someone else before so when it comes to lyrics I still try to say things with a twist, like taking an old phrase and changing it around because people like to be a little challenged by lyrics. Sometimes you just can't do that and you need to go back to the old phrases which work. But I think people like to be challenged a bit with lyrics."

Charlie couldn't have planned for a better career as all the elements are there: the musicianship, the songs, the attitude. How did it all line up that they'd be leading up a band, I ask?

"Thank you for the compliment," he replies. "I didn't plan it this way. In my early 20s I played in two different bands as a guitarist. I played in original bands

with really great songwriters and I became fascinated with their craft and they'd bring in a new song and I'd be blown away by that. I didn't realise I'd be the one doing that myself as I was happy as a guitar player. But watching them hone their craft made me want to try to write.

"The early songs I wrote were horrible but I had to start out somewhere and get that out of the way. I just wrote so much until I improved. These days, my wife is my biggest fan, but when I play a song for her I can tell if she likes it or not just by her body language. So I trust her."

What guitars would he grab if there was a fire in his house? "I've got a Martin 1948 000-18 that would be in one hand and I've got a newer Gibson, I think it's a 2009 or 2010 Hummingbird, which I really love and has a beautiful voice. I've written a lot of songs on that and played it on the last two albums. I've played a ton of vintage Hummingbirds. and Doves and this one is the first new one that I think is fantastic. Even my dad, who is an old Martin guy and only plays Martins agrees with me. He's a Bluegrass guy and a real purist, but has admitted how great this one sounds. I've also got a Gibson '64 LGO which is a small-bodied mahogany that's really great. I played that on the new album on a 'Long Way Back to Eden'."

It sounds like he's a guitar collector. "I am," he confesses. "It's an addiction and I've got tons of them. And for me, it's a sickness," he laughs. "That old Martin I keep at home because it's a little too old to take out on the road."

With his father a bluegrass guy and the fact that there is some tasty flat picking on *Holding All The Roses* in a bluegrass style did Charlie cop any of those licks from him?

"He's a rhythm player," he replies." But he does have some hot licks and he taught me some. I'm also a huge fan of Doc Watson, Clarence White, and Tony Rice. But I grew up playing bluegrass first, that and gospel came first for me.

With his father being a picker himself Starr was immersed in guitars from the moment he could hold one and his dad served as a mentor even though Charlie went down the rock route which was quite opposite from his father's Christian lifestyle.

"My dad is an acoustic purist and doesn't care for rock'n'roll much so I guess I rebelled," he explains. "I think I learned from him that you'll always have music once you have it in you. He's a very religious man who lives out in the country and he didn't come to see us when we did our first gig, which we played in a bar. But he did come see us at the Grand Ole Opry. He came to that and I think I was more nervous that he was there than for the 200 people out there which was our biggest audience at that point in time.

On 'Lay It All On Me' there's a pedal steel and slide guitars. Is that all him or Paul Jackson, the band's other guitarist?

"Thats me, I'm a hog," he admits. "See, if you wanna play that lick you better play it better than I do. I'm only joking. But if you are there recording I guess I do what I can because I hear it that way being the composer.

Chris Robinson came up with the band's name. "Yeah, we were stuck and he came up

with it out of nowhere. He just whipped that out. It really doesn't mean anything. It's just a southern thing, not to sound too corny."

Finally what are his favoured tunings? "I used open G quite a bit and drop D too. I learned a Jimmy Page tuning from Rich Robinson of the Crowes. It's the little intro to 'Randolph County Fair'. It's a fingerpick acoustic interlude type thing. It's not a new tuning, I was just picking at that and then Brendan liked it and used it as an intro."

Starr was surprised, if happily so, about how quickly UK audiences in particular seemed to cotton on to the band's sound and style. "It happened so quickly for us there and it was an unexpected surprise to get that attention there," he says. "I think we had three records in the top 40 there in a year. And every time we go back we have larger and larger audiences. We seem to resonate with people there and it's just fabulous." ■

***Holding All The Roses* is out now.**
Info: www.blackberrysmoke.com

ETHAN JOHNS

After working with Crosby, Stills & Nash, Emmylou Harris and Ryan Adams, record producer Ethan Johns finally steps out on his own, with an album that's more West Coast than West London

WORDS: JULIAN PIPER **IMAGES:** RACHEL HENDRY

"I've never felt intimidated, because as a rule great musicians aren't intimidating people, they tend to be encouraging; the insecure ones are the ones that are intimidating, overcompensating for the fact that they don't really have it."

Ethan Johns laughs as he contemplates whether – as per a question I have just asked him – hanging out with the likes of Crosby, Stills & Nash, Emmylou Harris, the Kings Of Leon and Laura Marling (to name but a few of the acts that he's worked with) might have raised an impossibly high bar when it comes to producing his own music.

"I've been very lucky that the musicians I've been around have always been incredibly supportive and generous with their time. People love to share what they know, and in my experience are so eager to share their musical situation with you, show you a tuning perhaps."

And it shows on his new album *Silver Liner*. Ethan's years of recording and playing with music aristocracy have lent him the kind of creative tapestry that few musicians get the chance to mainline. From the lazy strums of his Martin on the album's title track, a song that could assuredly be a Neil Young outtake, he comes up with songs that pay dues to no one in particular, but have that knack of always sounding faintly familiar.

It's a rare gift, but given his family background, it should be no surprise. For the record – no pun intended – Ethan is the son of Glyn Johns, a producer whose work has notably graced albums by the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Bob Dylan and Eric Clapton. And growing up with people like Bernie Leadon, Ronnie Lane and Andy Fairweather Low often popping in for tea, Ethan's course in life was probably mapped out from an early age.

"I don't think it was pre-ordained, but I think I was born a musician. My earliest memories of making music are from the age of three on, and my childhood certainly allowed me to have experiences that were going to provide me with opportunities I wouldn't have enjoyed otherwise. I didn't particularly attach any significance to the fact that musicians were around the house, or that they might be famous; it didn't occur to me. But if they were going to teach me to play drums or guitar, it was a great opportunity to pick their brains and learn something new. It wasn't until much later on that I learned that these people were so highly regarded; I just came from a house where music was highly regarded, which is pretty much the way it is with everyone I hang out with."

> **"When Emmylou Harris calls, and asks you to produce a record and tour with her, you just do it"**

When he was 16, Johns left school to work for his father as what he admits was 'a gopher'. "It was pretty amazing to have my father teach me about record production," he says. 'But he quickly made it clear that if it was something I wanted to do full time, I should find a job somewhere." After six months of writing to studios every week, he eventually landed a job as a tea boy, and the rest as they say, is history. So how come it's taken so long for him to step out of the shadows?

"It's taken me a while simply because I've always enjoyed making records or touring with other people so much. I've been in this incredible situation where, when someone like Emmylou Harris phones you up, and asks you to produce a record and then tour with her on guitar – you just do it. I worked with Emmylou on *Red Dirt Girl*, and spending time and plugging into the way an extraordinary artist like her works was an incredible opportunity. I never went around thinking, 'Oh, I wish I could work on my own thing!'

"But I never stopped writing songs. Throughout the whole 14-year period of working in the States, they were always a part of my life, and I just woke up one morning, and realised I should be doing something more positive about it.

"But talk about generous spirits," he enthuses. "I was sitting around and singing

a song after a session with Laura Marling, and she said 'That's great, you should really come and sing that at my concert at the Royal Festival Hall'. And that was a really important turning point. I enjoyed the whole experience, and was reminded what a great thing it is to write a song and then play it for an audience. A song only becomes alive when you perform it in a room full of people, and I realised that I'd been missing that whole thing. That's really the only thing that spurred me on to do my own albums."

There's a very retro 'West Coast' feel to the album; there's B.J. Cole whining away on his pedal steel and a lovely sparse live feel to the recording. It all evokes images of big sky country rather than inner London, I suggest.

"I like to think that there's a spirit of maybe Laurel Canyon in 1970, and if there is – that's great," Ethan admits. "I spent half my life there, and played guitar and drums with Crosby, Stills & Nash for about a year. And yes, there's obviously something about the title track that's made people think of Neil Young. I listen to Neil a lot, so it certainly works its way in there. But there again, people have said the most extraordinary things about what certain songs remind them of. But on the title track I think it's the sound as much as anything else. I'm playing a Martin, the lead guitar is put through a tweed Fender Deluxe amp turned up to 12, and everything is recorded live onto 16-track two-inch tape. And it's a great band: Jeremy Stacey, who plays drums, did a fine job on the mix. There's nothing digital on the record at all. The whole thing's very simple; we used vintage equipment, tube mics, and there's no compression except a little bit on the vocals.

"It does sound very open," Ethan says, "but that's the way they used to do it, and I think that when people say it reminds them of other stuff, it's because of the way it was captured. If you put four or five people in a room who really know how to play, then you're bound to capture the spirit. I was singing it live, and so there's a lot of inter-reaction between us going on, which is just how those great early records were made. The whole idea of recording one instrument at a time is very boring and just puts me to sleep."

And of course having Gillian Welch on hand to sing backup must have been useful. "I love Gillian Welch, we're great pals and I've known her for over 15 years. I met her through Emmylou when we did a Gram Parsons tribute record and a TV show. I was working with Whiskeytown at the time, and through them Ryan [Adams] ended up moving to Nashville, which is how Gillian and David Rawlings ended up on his

"There's nothing digital on the record. The whole thing's simple; vintage equipment, tube mics and a little compression"

Heartbreaker record. I have a lot of respect for them both and was very happy when she said she'd pop down and sing. She actually recorded the track playing drums, which didn't make the album – it's a shame because she's a great drummer."

Given his background and experience, was it easy to hand over the mixing and production duties to someone else, or was it something of a relief? "I've known Jeremy for about five years. We first met in the States and I booked him to play on the first Tom Jones record I produced. Within five minutes of us playing together I knew I'd found a musical soul mate. There was that kind of unspoken chemistry that doesn't happen often, but you know that you just feel things in a certain way and have great communication. I'm old school, and I realise that you have to have someone who can be objective about your performance. Once you realise that, and you have someone in place that you can trust implicitly to help discern what's good, the better the performance becomes and everything becomes more real. It's a two-way street."

He manages to capture a great acoustic guitar sound on the record. Does he have a favoured make, I ask? "I've always been a Martin man, and I used a 1969 D-18 and a 1974 D-28. But being a session musician and a producer, I've been used to the idea of having a lot of different guitars to do different jobs. I like Gibson J-200s and J-45s, but because I was singing quietly on the first record, the Gibson was just too loud. The tuning on most of the record is just a dropped E string to D – a beautiful world to live in and I'm very happy." ■

***Silver Liner* is out now.**

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ROO PANES

We met the English singer-songwriter Roo Panes to discuss Bill Callahan-esque use of musical space, technical ignorance and why avoiding listening to music is not necessarily a bad thing for a musician

WORDS: MORGAN MATTHEWS **IMAGES:** WASTED YOUTH PR

Roo Panes comes across as easy-going and self-assured. And he even – unusually for a sensitive musician type – has no trouble confessing that he quite likes his newest musical effort. "I'm really happy with it, yeah," he admits. "What's been the nicest thing about *Paperweights* is that it's all come together really well and even by the end of it, I was listening back and thinking 'it does actually sound alright!'" It certainly does sound alright; it's a snappier and sunnier record than Roo's debut, *Little Giant*, I put to him, yet it sounds richer and fuller, while maintaining the sense of space that pervades the first one. Does he agree? "I love writing spacious music," he confirms, "because I always want to focus on lyrics and I want to give them room to breathe, so I think space in the composition too is something that's important and something I've always aimed for. I think that comes across in the production too, and with the instruments we used; we don't try to fill in every gap, so it makes for a record with room and space surrounding it."

Roo also approached *Paperweights* slightly differently lyrically, which he feels has had a significant effect on the final product. "With the songwriting on this one, I realised that what I was trying to do was not edit too much," he says. "With *Little Giant* I had a clear idea what I wanted it to run like and the philosophy of it, and although there is still direction on this one, it's more about the freedom of the writing. So there are songs here that I would have stopped writing on the last one, but this time it was more like 'if this is where it's going, I'm not going to stop it.' There are some risks here, I think, and it makes for a more colourful set."

It's a bold method for a young musician; I wonder if there is a self-confidence coming through on this album. "It's an interesting one," he smiles, "but I think for me it was less about confidence and more about making a decision. To me, the most special thing about music is that it allows you to express what you're feeling through words to sum it up and incorporate melodies into a mood that reinforces the whole point and emotion. I love what we can do with that process and for me it is recognition of that being my favourite thing about music and a decision that if I don't go about it that way I won't enjoy it as much and it won't be as rich an experience. With *Paperweights* I wanted to make sure I was writing what I felt was authentic and true to me at that time and not think too much about the outcome. I wanted to focus on and enjoy the moment and that meant that the reception of it afterwards was pretty much out of my control, which I was quite happy with."

"When you concentrate on technical stuff, it unlocks a whole new world. But I haven't entered that world yet. I'm happy with the basics"

He pauses a moment. "I do wonder if how material will be received can often become paramount to the artist during the writing process and if that can create less freedom to create and can mean people take less risks."

It's an interesting point from a thoughtful individual and a sensitive musician, and you get the impression he is not particularly risk-averse in his own musical expression. I read a piece on his site mentioning the fact that he listens to very little music himself and mention it to him. "It's not that I don't and it's not that I do listen, in a way," he laughs. "I mean, I've grown up with music around me, but people are often surprised by how little music I do listen to as a musician. I think it's because I don't study music like many people do when they listen, but it's not a deliberate thing. It's just that if I feel like hearing music, I'll pick up my guitar and start to write; so in that mood, I tend to create, rather than put on a record. But that's not to say I don't hear music," he stresses. "It's been in my life all along and it still is, I just don't listen to it in an intentional way for study or writing."

What has been important to Panes along the way has been the environment he occupies when writing music and the space it allows or doesn't. "I think at this age I'm certainly aware that if I'm in the countryside or travelling I have this space in my mind that I can fill with music," he says, pausing again. "Whereas, if I'm rushed too much, I find it very hard to process anything or turn what's in there into songs and music. So in terms of what my environment gives me, which is a climate to write in, it is important. *Little Giant* was a more straightforwardly pastoral album than this one, but there are still songs like 'Summer Thunder' on here that certainly have that feel."

The album as a whole has quite a light touch, and the sense of space that Panes often mentions as key in his work permeates. But it seems that the production side of music is where he draws the line. "Oh man," he laughs. "I feel fortunate enough to have such a basic understanding of technology

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that I really don't focus on it much at all! With regards to my writing, I'm still so focused on the roots of a song that I don't look too much further than a guitar and a voice, and other sounds I feel might enrich it. But when you start concentrating on technical stuff, it can unlock a whole new world and I think it can really transform how you look at the whole thing. I haven't entered that world yet; I'm happy with the raw basics."

Interestingly, the final almost-hidden track on *Paperweights* is the live-sounding 'Awoken', with the lyric "I want the air I've breathed." The song's demo-tone sounds slightly at odds with the slickly produced album. "It was a deliberate decision to put that one there," he says. "It goes back again to my interest in not editing too much. I actually wrote that song about ten minutes before the recording and I said to my sister that I'd written it, and she said 'let's film it.' So the song on record is the audio through a video camera; it's completely live and I felt it was important to keep that moment instead of re-recording and losing it. I've tried singing it a couple of times since, but that one feels different. Also, it's a lyrically vulnerable song, so I figured, instead of it disrupting the flow of the rest of the album, let's tuck it away somewhere safe at the end. It seemed fitting to me".

Moving on to trade instruments, Roo is still very much an acoustic man. "I still love playing acoustic," he admits. "Like I said, I'm not technical-minded, so I like nothing more than going into an acoustic guitar shop and picking up these instruments, each with their own character and figuring out how to work with them. My go-to guitar is a little Guild, which has quite a dark tone to it. I love that guitar". He stops a moment and then laughs. "I don't know which type it is, I'm sorry! It's dark in colour, maybe mahogany bodied, and small. A 350? I don't know!" A bit of research tells me it is the little Guild M-120 Cherry Red that Roo plays most, a delightful and reasonably-priced guitar with a wonderful compact design and warm sound. "I went into a shop looking for a guitar that would work alongside strings on record", he explains. "I even had Nick Drake's sound in my mind when I was looking, because he used strings a lot, and the little Guild was perfect. It was only afterwards I found out the whole connection with Drake and the album cover with that Guild guitar".

As well as the six-string, Panes has also long been a fan of the twelve-string beast, although it doesn't crop up as much on *Paperweights*. "At the time, it was exactly the sound I was looking for", he answers. "It was that sort of 'jangly' sound that I couldn't find on the six. And the twelve has everything you need – mids, bass and such versatility and depth. That amount of dynamic range really excited me, because that was what I wanted to get from my sound. I like crescendo and quiet and loud and everything else, and the twelve enables that in one instrument; it's fantastic." ■

***Paperweights* is out on CRC Music.**

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TURIN BRAKES

Gale Paridjanian of Turin Brakes chats to us about the release of new album Lost Property, and the acoustic sound that is the bedrock of the band's success

WORDS: ANDY HUGHES
IMAGES: BEN COLE & ANDY NEAL

Gale Paridjanian and Olly Knights, who form the nucleus of Turin Brakes, have been friends since their school days, and the sound of the band has been evolving ever since their initial jam sessions. Yet one constant comes from their distinctive acoustic sound, which seems to be drawn from the West Coast feel of their guitar playing. "That's a good description of our sound and our songwriting, I think," says Gale as he takes a break from guitar practice at home. "When I was learning to play the guitar, I did try and aim for the West Coast sound, which is what I liked when I was growing up. I found a copy of the *NME* that was published the year I was born, and they were writing about people like Jackson Browne and Crosby, Stills & Nash, the musicians that I liked. It was very different from the *NME* I read when I was in my teens!"

While we're on guitars, it's worth talking about the gear that Gale and Olly use when recording and touring. "We have a strange attitude to our guitars really. We like classic sounds, and then we like to change things up and sound a little different. So we always have Gibson J-200s around at home and in the studio because they are dependable, and we like the early Rolling Stones sound we get with them. We have also been using a Guild M20, which we used on the last album as well. It's the same model that Nick Drake is playing on the cover of the *Bryter Layter* album, Olly and I have got one each. It feels really small when you play it, the opposite of the J-200, but you can get a really good big sound out of it. Olly has battled for years on stage playing big-bodied guitars, and now we have one that looks a lot more comfortable, he doesn't look like he is a small boy sitting behind it!

"We also bring something new in to mix it up a little bit. I've got an Atkin with a cedar top that I've had for about 12 years. I changed the strings on it about a year ago, so now it sounds really good. I always think that if you put new strings onto a guitar just to record with it, you can tell from the sound. It makes it sound like a vintage guitar if you play with older strings. Other than that, we like J-45s as well because we like classics."

But if anyone is getting the idea that Turin Brakes are wind-in-the-hair super-sensitive types, Gale is here to disavow you of that notion. "I am fond of my Charvel guitar, it's made in Korea and it's like the 'heavy metal' acoustic. It's the most reliable thing in my life – I've had it for more years than I have not had it. If anything defines the Turin Brakes acoustic sound it's probably the sound of the Charvel. Olly and I have conversations in the studio that go, 'We could use a nice Martin on this track, or we could hire in some really nice top-end acoustics... or we could just use the guitars we always use!' and that's what tends to happen. I take the Charvel on the road with me because it's robust and something of a workhorse, and we don't mind the 'working guitars' getting some of the bumps and bangs that can't be avoided on the road. I took the Atkin out on tour with me for a while, but it didn't really work out. Every time I plugged it in, I got a different sound with it, and that got to be really unpredictable, so that stays home with the J-45."

Right behind any discussion about acoustic guitars has to come the discussion about the songs that are written and arranged on them, and Gale is keen to update fans about the ongoing development of the writing process in the band. "Olly has always been the main songwriter in the band, and we have come to the conclusion in the course of the band's career that songs need to go through Olly's songwriting filter, otherwise it sounds like there are two competing forces at work, and that interferes with the identity of the band's sound.

"We have been in the habit of spending a day or so jamming with different songwriters that we hear about, sometimes the record label hooks us up with people, and sometimes it's people Olly or I get to hear about ourselves. Lately, we have been working with a friend called Thomas Speight and we've ended up writing a lot of songs with him. Three of those songs are on the new album: 'Jump Start', 'Save You', and 'Martini'. We were a bit unsure whether they fitted in with our sound, but everyone we played them to liked them, and when we played them to Rob and Eddie, our bass player and drummer, they said they sounded just like Turin Brakes, so that was all the reassurance we needed. One of the transferable skills you pick up when you write songs for as long as we have is that you can collaborate with someone and you can usually come up with at least one finished song in a day. That makes the collaborations easier because you know fairly early on if it's going to be something to pursue. Tom is coming out

on tour with us, so we will be spending a lot of time together, and we can see if anything more develops. He is really good at picking our useable sections from the snippets of ideas we keep throwing at him. We thought that the songs we wrote for Tom were going to finish up on his album, but as I said, some of them have ended up on ours. We have always had something of a 'closed door' policy when it comes to writing for Turin Brakes but now, here we are on album number seven, and the door seems to be open."

Turin Brakes' adventurous spirit often finds them exploring new soundscapes and atmospheres for each successive album – yet every album retains the essential core of a Turin Brakes record. "It's a difficult balance," Gale says. "On the one hand you want to move forward as musicians and keep things exciting for us, but we also want to make sure that things are recognisable for our fans, because they expect a certain sound from us. We couldn't put out an album of dubstep, for example, and expect the traditional Turin Brakes audience to embrace it. So the challenge is meeting in the middle –somewhere between what do people want from us, and what do we want to give them.

"Music develops from the time you think of the original idea, through the time you work it up into a song and onwards through the time you record it. Sometimes we may come up with an idea and then have to practise the guitar parts in order to be able to play them sufficiently well to record them, and the rehearse them again to be able to play properly on stage. Often though, simpler is what we go with because simpler is what works better. I am not going to come into the studio and say, 'Here is a 10-minute guitar solo I'd like to play at the end of this song because I like playing it.'"

So is there an outlet for other creativity? "Absolutely. When I am at home, I will often play music that would not be remotely suitable for Turin Brakes, purely for the pleasure of playing it on guitar. It's nice to play without any pressure of having to come up with something for an album – just to play something because I like playing it and know that it's never going to be heard by anyone except me. I love doing that.

"I am not the best sight reader in the world, but over the last couple of years, as a hobby really, I have been practising sight reading and I am really enjoying it. I find that simply reading and playing music at home on my own, and just letting the music flow through me, is an incredibly peaceful and relaxing thing to do."

Do you like a clean acoustic song, or are you an effects fan? "Well, I don't think we can go too crazy with effects for Turin Brakes, it comes back to what we were discussing earlier, the need for our fans to enjoy a sound that they are familiar with, but not over-familiar with. Our song 'Blindsided Again' has a psychedelic section in it, but I think our fans would only really like that in a section of a song, rather than a whole song.

"I love effects, I play with them a lot at home – I spend hours with them. My latest is a Superego synth, which can bring in synth sounds into the guitar lines you play. I also like my DB7 Boss delay pedal, which controls any parameter and lets you control feedback and delay. These things are really not for the Turin Brakes sound, but like the 'spare time' guitar playing and sight reading, I just enjoy them for their own sake. I do think that anything you use as a musician feeds into what you do in your work, it doesn't matter if that's direct or subliminal, the added influence is always good."

With a new album recently (and successfully) launched, the band has been rehearsing the tracks ready to take them out on the road, which can present its own set of problems not necessarily foreseen at the writing and recording stages. "So far, everything has gone pretty smoothly I am glad to say," Gale says. "Sometimes getting some of the four-part harmony vocals can be a bit tricky, and we are working on some of those. Usually you record your instrumental part and your vocal part separately, but you have to be able to do them both at the same time if you are going to play the song live. 'Black Rabbit' is a sad song that starts off with Ollie playing acoustic, and me playing some minimal electric guitar over the top of that. It goes into a kind of a freak-out ending, and oddly enough, it's not the big full-on ending that is proving tricky, it's the sad, emotional beginning. The bit we are thinking about is where exactly to put it in the running order. You have to make sure that your live set is balanced, and works up to a good ending."

After seven albums – and over a million records sold – we think the Turin Brakes might just have that set list sorted by the time their European tour starts in April. ■

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SUZZY ROCHE LUCY WAINWRIGHT ROCHE

The mother and daughter duo tell us about recording and performing while keeping things in the family

WORDS: TERI SACCONE

Many musicians wouldn't entertain the idea of collaborating professionally with a parent or child, yet Lucy Wainwright Roche and her mother Suzzy Roche have formed folk duo Roche and Wainwright and, according to them, are enjoying their partnership immensely.

Suzzy first found fame as a member of sister band the Roches, a three-part harmony group who merged folk-based songs with razor-sharp wit. Suzzy is the youngest Roche sister and was the paramour of Loudon Wainwright III, Lucy's father (making her the half-sibling of musicians Rufus and Martha). Lucy grew up in a sprawling musical family, yet her first career was teaching in New York City, before singing backup on Rufus' tour in 2005. By 2007, she began playing music full time, releasing a solo album in 2010, *Lucy*, which showed off her delicate and self-assured voice.

Now mother and daughter are touring in support of their own collaboration, *Fairytale and Myth*, an album which includes the Beatles cover 'For No One' and Loudon Wainwright's 'When I'm At Your House', among others.

Working with family has the potential to be a dramatic undertaking, yet Suzzy believes that this bond is the key to her music with Lucy: "Lucy is my only child and I had her when I was kind of young, so we grew up together. It's not something that we ever really thought we would do. But for me, at the end of my career, it's really the cherry on top of things. It's a nice change for me. Plus it's a lot of fun to work together and although we didn't plan it, it seems like it happened at the right time."

Their voices intertwine and complement each other perfectly on the album: "I sing the higher parts because I have a higher voice," explains Lucy. "But sometimes we work out our parts spontaneously and it all works out somehow. It works out naturally."

"We do sing so differently," adds Suzzy, "and it's a nice mix together. My voice is older and raspier, so there are differences."

Despite being the offspring of two musical families, Lucy did not sing with her mother until she was a young adult. "I think the first time we sang together was when I was in high school," says Lucy. "It was a duet and we still do it in our show. But up to that point we didn't sing together."

Nevertheless she was immersed in the family business from an early age. "Lucy was on the road with me and my sisters from early on, and she loved to sing, although not on stage," says her mother. "But she sang a lot because it is such a musical family."

It's an interesting jump from teaching to a career in showbiz, which was, no doubt, a big move for Lucy. "It was and it was my way of breaking away from the family business, I guess," she says. "I got a master's degree and a regular job teaching. It was a job I really liked. But I then realised I missed something about the music lifestyle that I grew up with once I got away from it. That drew me back."

"Lucy was on the road with me and my sisters from early on, and she loved to sing, although not on stage"

Suzzy has been writing songs for decades with the Roches and now with Lucy. Her songwriting methodology is to always be ready for a song. "The only thing I can say is that I make time every day to be alone with the guitar to play and sing," she says. "Some days it's great, some days it's frustrating, but it's a practice, a habit… and songs can pop out quickly or take six months to come into clarity. But I seem to need an empty space in my brain for them. I am a person who benefits greatly from practice. I'm not a genius, and I was never a prodigy. I think of myself as a working class artist. I've dedicated my life to what I do, and in the big scheme of things it can often seem futile, but for some reason I keep going. Maybe because when I actually write a song or play and sing well, it feels good."

With Lucy's entire family on both sides being professional musicians did that create any pressure for her to meet their high standards? "No," she says, without hesitation. "Fortunately Rufus, Martha and I all sound very different and what we do is very different, which is great because we can come together and collaborate, but also we're not stepping on each other's toes in our individual careers, so I guess there's room for everybody to be doing what we're doing.

Finally, I couldn't resist asking Roche about former relationship with Loudon and if he'd had influenced her creatively.

"Yes, he did," she replies. "There are some people that you just know will be travelling through this life with you in one way or another. He's a great songwriter and performer, authentic, hard working, and prolific beyond belief. I have probably seen more Loudon Wainwright shows than anyone else in the world, so I'm sure he has influenced me, but he's a much different kind of songwriter than I am. He writes about himself. He writes about conventional structures like family and marriage. I'm more of an outlaw. I live outside of those structures." ■

Wainwright and Roche will release Mud and Apples, the follow up to Fairytale and Myth, this spring.

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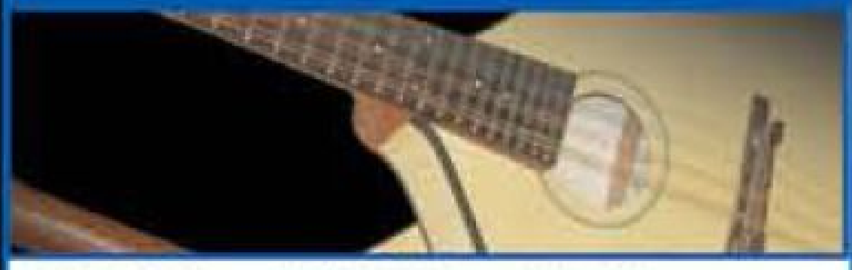

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8520 - Ohana CK35CE Electro Concert Ukulele
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5009 - Ozark Ukulele Banjo
12522 - Recording King RU998 Resonator Ukulele
12740 - ResoVille Weeki Wachee Resonator Ukulele
10384 - Risa Electric Soprano Ukulele, UKS363MP
10385 - Risa UKS385MP Solid Concert Electro Uke
10424 - Uluru Lehua I Soprano Ukulele
12376 - Yamaha GL1 Guitalele

Travel & Tenor Guitars

14473 - Luna Safari Henna 3/4 Size Travel Guitar
14472 - Luna Safari Starry Night 3/4 Travel Guitar
5835 - Martin Backpacker Acoustic Travel Guitar
13856 - Martin Ed Sheeran X Signature Ed Electro
13324 - Martin LX Red Little Martin
7115 - Martin LX1 Little Martin
7320 - Martin LX1E, Electro Travel Guitar
9588 - Tanglewood TW15 Baby All Solid Travel
13271 - Vintage VTG100 Travel Guitar in Natural
13128 - Vintage VTR800PB Viator Travel Guitar
14522 - Yamaha SLG200S Silent Guitar, Steel
8846 - Ashbury AT-14 Tenor Guitar
8851 - Ashbury AT24 Tenor Guitar
14615 - Dobro, circa 1975, Original Vintage
12613 - Fender FR50CEy Electro Resonator
14530 - Gibson Dobro USA Made Resonator, Used
12737 - ResoVille Parkville MS12 Single Cone Nic
12730 - ResoVille Burbank MT12 Tri-Cone, Nickel
12732 - ResoVille Burbank MT12 Tri-Cone, Gold
12731 - ResoVille Burbank MT12 Tri-Cone, Red
13244 - ResoVille Edgewood WS12R Maple Parlor
12738 - ResoVille Lincolnwood WS12 Reso, Maple

For full guitar details, pricing and photos, enter the number next to each guitar model into our SKU search facility on the website.

FROGGY BOTTOM MODEL L

Froggy Bottom's Michael Millard has produced a limited edition parlour based initially on a vintage Martin 1-17. Stephen Bennett is the lucky man asked to spend some quality time with it...

WORDS: STEPHEN BENNETT **IMAGES:** WILL BREMRIDGE

Cars are cars – all over the world. And who'd argue with a Paul Simon lyric? Indeed, a Trabant would probably get you across London just as quickly as a Ferrari but, somehow, that's not really the point, is it? Just about anyone with enough spare wood is turning out parlour guitars these days and for every thoroughbred there'll be a thousand carthorses. But enough with the transport...

The Froggy Bottom L (for Limited) Maple Parlour could be the beaming poster child for a 'good things come in small packages' campaign. It's lovely, little, loud (more Ls!) and remarkably versatile with a big, fat bass response that would require a comedy double-take if you could actually take your eyes off it.

Based up in the pine-clad hills of rural Vermont, Froggy founder, Michael Millard, is central casting's dream of the shaggy-haired, slow-talking backwoodsman of a bygone American age. Beneath that far-from-cultivated image lies a body of work that's one of the cornerstones of modern luthiery. It helps, of course, in the alchemical quest to turn base planks into pure sound, to be blessed with the magic touch of a perfectionist craftsman. Millard was an apprentice boat-builder until, in 1970, he transferred those timeless hand-eye skills – no confining jigs or moulds for him, thank you – to the free-form instrument-building aesthetic of Gurian Guitars in New York. Within four years he'd branched out on his own to set up shop first in New Hampshire then in the tiny, mountain fastness of er... Chelsea, where he's still relying on those same trusted instincts to this day. And even if Froggy's prices do seem a bit Chelsea for some, fortunately both the work ethic and the consistently magnificent product are 100 per cent Vermont.

Based, dimension-wise, on an old (and all-but-written-off) Martin 1-17 he'd had

"The L rings with an endless sustain and sings with an almost glass-harmonica purity at the top end"

in for repair, Millard became captivated by not only the dry, finger-style-blues snap and snarl of this wounded little beast but by the enormous noise it made for such a little 'un. He's set out here to honour that combination by recreating its essence in tandem with his own sense of what makes a great parlour instrument.

Millard's gone for quilted rock maple back and sides here with an Adirondack red spruce top to bring an extra touch of warmth and sweetness to the richly age-enhanced tonal vocabulary of its mahogany forebear. With its clean-limbed, petite proportions it's already easy on the eye – even before you take all the gracefully elegant decorative appointments into account. Maple is back in a big way these days, it seems – especially with the small workshop and individual luthiers who are building to the highest standards and specifications. You begin to wonder where (and why) it ever went. The great mandolins – not to mention generations of now-priceless violins and cellos – all seem to benefit tonally, so why not a small-bodied guitar? Long story; most of it marketing nonsense.

So, first impressions are of a gorgeous, all-over and deep-glowing tobacco sunburst (top, back, sides and neck) that manages the cunning optical illusion of making the guitar look bigger than it actually is. Well, if the volume's going to fool you, anyway... why not? Photos do scant justice to a rippling back grain that looks like crumpled gold foil submerged in maple syrup. But then we are talking Vermont, after all. The subtly gleaming rainbows of abalone in the purfling, rosette, back-strip, headstock logo and position markers boast impeccably ethical 'hand-dived' credentials; which, while sounding a bit Waitrose, perhaps, actually means there's been no sun-fading or sand erosion to dull a soft shimmer that's as close to its original oceanic luminosity as it gets. It's all accessorised-off in the classiest fashion with gold, three-in-line Waverly tuners, buffalo-bone nut and saddle and a faux-tortoise scratch-plate.

Froggy Bottom no longer offers the one-off, Petria Mitchell 'scrimshaw-effect' heel-caps it was once noted for (and which

FROGGY BOTTOM L REVIEW

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Froggy Bottom
Model: L
RRP: £11,250
Body Size: Parlour
Made In: Vermont, USA
Top: Adirondack red spruce
Back and Sides: Quilted rock maple
Bridge: Ebony
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Gabon ebony
Frets: 19
Tuners: Waverly 4063G
Nut Width: 1¾"
Scale Length: 24¾"
Onboard Electrics: None
Strings Fitted: John Pearse Light 80/20
Gig Bag/Case Included: Black American Vintage Series TKL

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Just about everything
Cons: Does seem a little bit dear despite the overall fabulousness!
Overall: As fine a parlour instrument as you're ever going to find

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ★★★★★
Build Quality: ★★★★★
Value for Money: ★★★★½
5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

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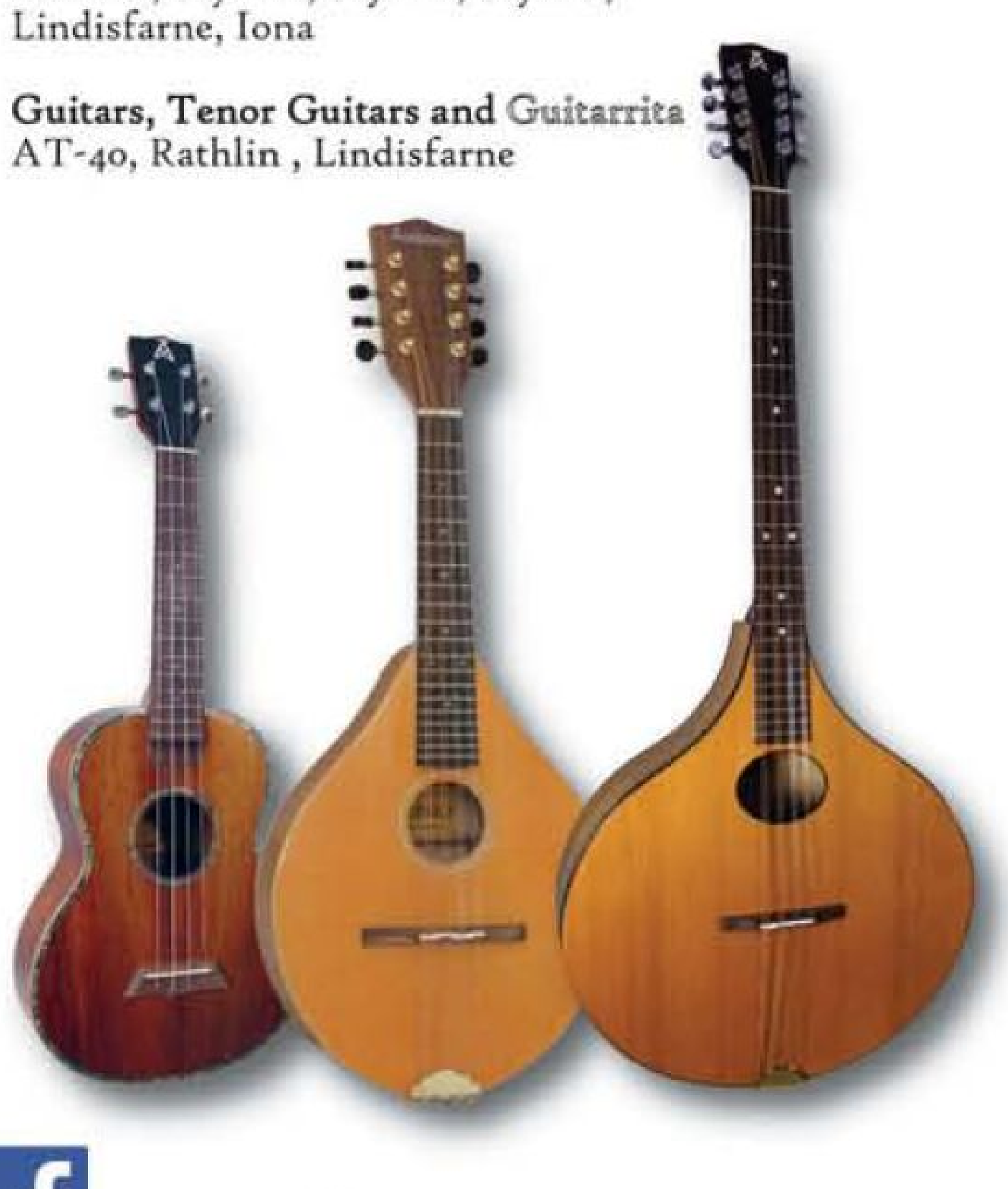


Ashburyguitars.com

divided opinion, anyway) so here the cap is a plain but deep-creamy quilted maple that perfectly complements the overall picture.

The 12-fret to the body mahogany neck is so comfortable as to feel instantly familiar; its 'Mad Rose' veneered, slotted peg-head sticking firmly to the 1930s, small-body vibe, as does the ebony pyramid bridge and the elaborate, '#7 pattern' fretboard inlays that recall the highly adorned Fairbanks and Gibson banjos of yesteryear. Beyond that, the bling factor is subtly restrained; this is an instrument that exudes an effortless glamour without ever feeling showy.

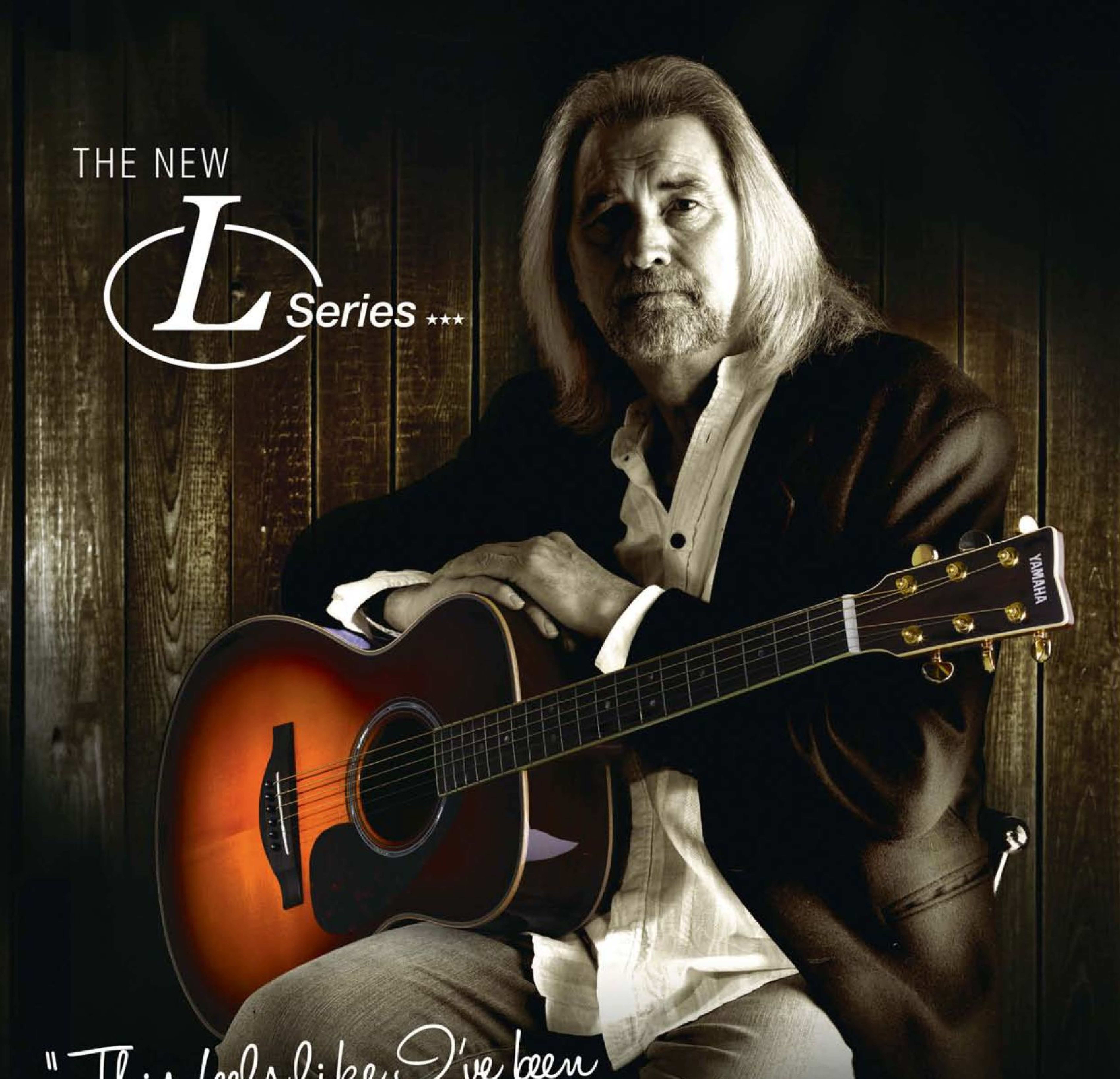
The sound? There's a growing pile of flannel out there (unsupported by much empirical evidence) about parlours belying their tiny size and delivering a quart's worth of sound from a pint-pot body. Well, this one really does. The 13' lower bout certainly adds a surprising 'that's a parlour?' oomph to the volume, but then, anybody can get loud – it's the tone that counts. The L's voice is wonderfully balanced with a sparkling brightness that's underpinned by real, cavernous depth. All that customary, shape-specific, parlour clarity and separation makes this a finger-stylist's dream that, rich and focused as it already is (at a mere six months old), will only get better.

To balance the bite of its rapid-response, punchy strum-capacity, in contrasting, dropped-D romantic-mode, the L rings with an endless sustain and sings with an almost glass-harmonica purity at the top end. And while the light gauge stringing clearly lends itself to that elusive, dust-bowl, Topic Records Americana sound, it also encourages a more intimate dialogue between the player and the instrument. You start to listen, suggest and respond as if in the most rewarding of two-way conversations; a notion captured best by another fabled luthier, Tom Ribbecke, when he suggested that: 'Your guitar is your dance partner'.

Once again, the old tone-mantra comes to the fore; it's all in the build. Michael Millard still constructs his instruments face-down on the bench, in line with the established traditions of the great classical guitar-makers of 19th-century Europe.

There are no big, design-revolutionary concepts in play here; the Froggy-trademark high, thin and deeply arched braces still serve to provide the familiar live-wire response from both top and back, while the standard (24.75") scale length ensures plenty of structural strength without sacrificing all that tonal complexity.

It's pricey, okay – but it's spectacular. Any luthier who can even come close to recreating that Holy Grail, sonic template of the 30s Martins deserve credit, but to make it your own and take it on to new levels is something to which few can aspire. This is Millard/Froggy pulling off the old Zen archery trick of picking a target others can't even see and hitting it square in the middle. The L really is a little gem. ■



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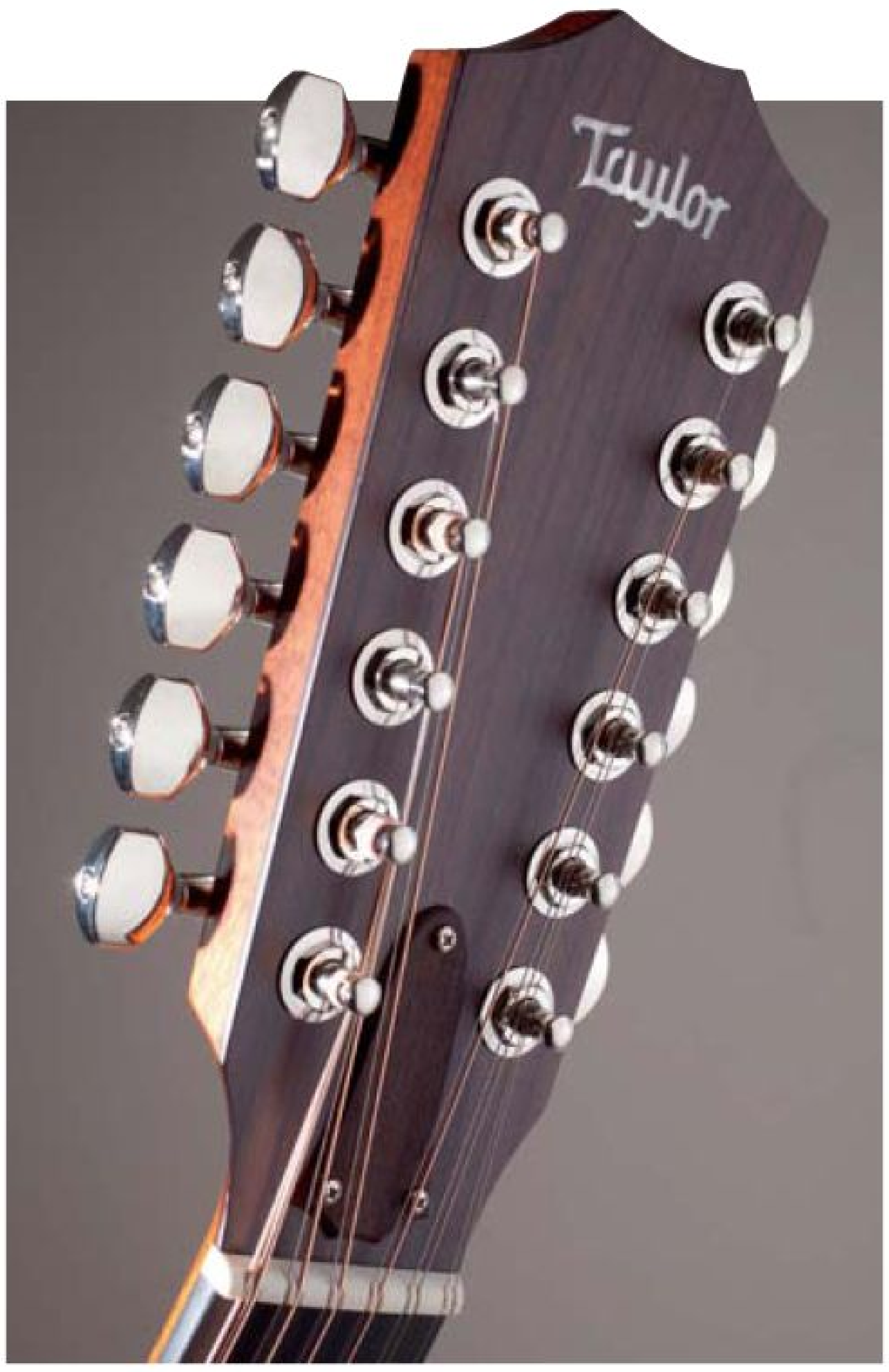
TAYLOR 360E

Fitting 12 strings to a mahogany-topped acoustic is not 'typical' of Taylor, but it could be a design that's here to stay

WORDS: SAM WISE **IMAGES:** RICHARD ECCLESTONE

Cards on the table: I've been playing an all-mahogany Washburn dreadnought exclusively for years until recently. As such, the marked increase in mahogany topped-guitars among the fashionable,'hip' kids of the acoustic guitar world has sparked my interest. So, to receive a Taylor that is a departure from their tried and trusted tonewood configurations is a real treat. For 2016 Taylor has decided to expand its 12-string range to cover all their body shapes, and experimented for the first time with mahogany soundboard 12-strings.

A consensus seems to have emerged that mahogany-topped guitars need to be simple and free from adornments, perhaps to hint at 1930s austerity specials or wandering bluesmen. Our review model is no exception. The 360e is finished with a deliciously striped, subtle sunburst to the top, and the simplest black and white striped soundhole rosette and binding. The back and sides are made from Tasmanian blackwood, well book-matched to the dark edges, but promising a more koa-like tone than an all mahogany model might yield. The neck is also mahogany, wearing an ebony fretboard with simple but elegant diamond inlays. Though the material is not specified, the headstock logo is in Italian acrylic (far superior to domestic American acrylic, of course), and we make the assumption the inlays are too. At one end of the fretboard containing 20 slim, vintage-style frets is a Tusq nut, and at the other, a micarta saddle. Micarta is a bone substitute made from resins and paper or linen, and was quite widely used by Martin at one time, though it's not so common these days. The headstock is overlaid in Indian rosewood, and in addition to the aforementioned Italian acrylic, carries 12 enclosed Taylor-branded tuners. This is, comparatively, a poverty spec guitar, which is how Taylor manages to bring it in at around



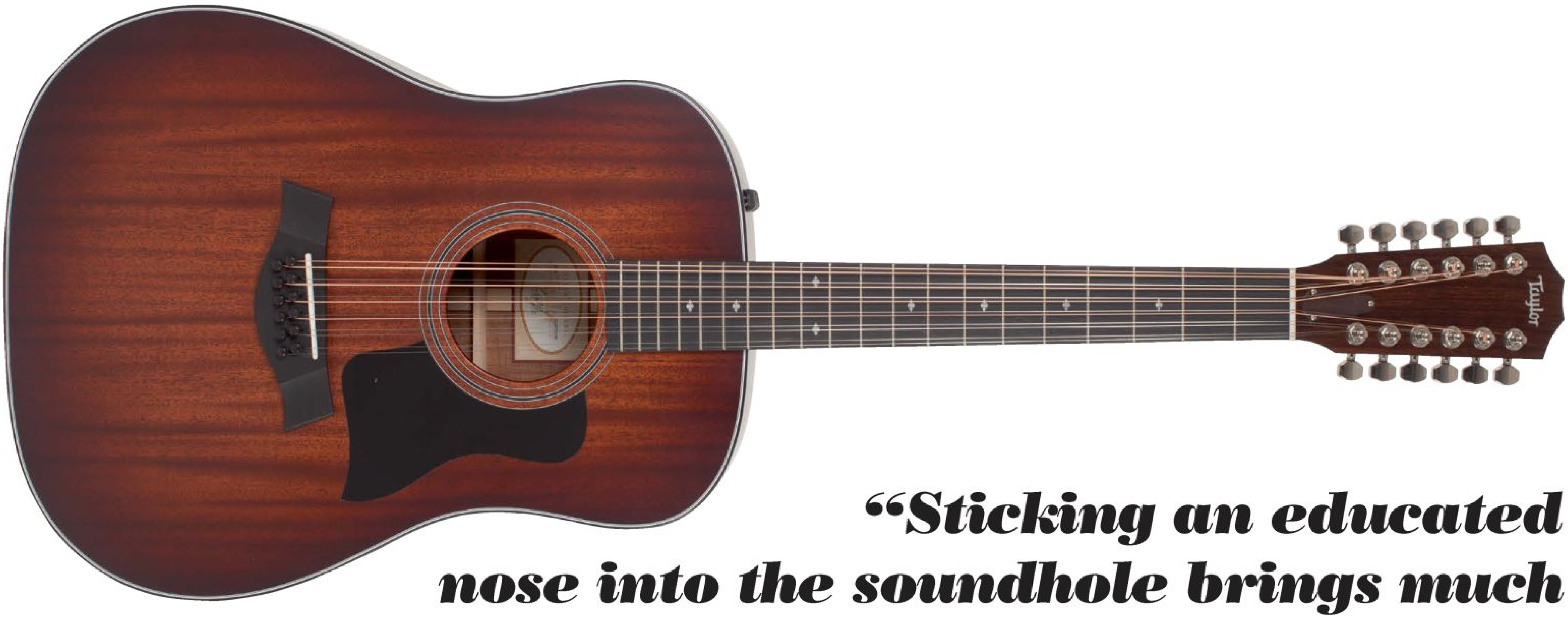
"This Taylor 360e is good. Very good, in fact. But, take it from me, it won't be what you're expecting"

£1,500. Yet, given that this is still twice the price of some of the Asian-made competition, it needs to be really good to justify the tag.

One place Taylor hasn't scrimped is on the onboard pickup system – including the award-winning Expression System 2. Taylor has always been an innovative, forward-thinking company and the company claims the Expression System 2 could be a real game changer. Its patented behind-the-saddle design aims to address the harshness and 'quack' so common to a lot of piezo systems. According to Taylor, the placement of three piezo sensors behind the saddle captures a more dynamic range of acoustic sound and responds well in a variety of settings. Married to three simple rotary controls for the bass, treble and volume, the preamp is minimalist and isn't going to delight those who like to fiddle with a lot of buttons. But it's understated, and totally in keeping with the rest of the guitar.

Despite the relative popularity of mahogany tops at the moment, their spruce-topped brethren still hugely outnumber them. If you want to stand out in style, you could do worse than this 360e. As you would expect from Taylor, the quality is flawless, and sticking an educated nose into the soundhole brings you much more a sense of the forest than the glue factory.

Remember, this is a dreadnought: it's deep, it's wide, and it has a thick waist that can make it unwieldy for smaller players. As dreadnoughts go, however, it's not unusually difficult to wrangle, and Taylor has certainly tamed the playability issues that dogged the (non-Taylor) 12-strings of my youth. The action is low and easy, and the neck profile is slim and slick. Now we come to a bone of contention. In recent months, I've been reading reviewers describe mahogany soundboards as having a dry, direct and punchy tone. While a punchy mid is a feature I notice, I can't agree with the description of dry. For me, mahogany has a rich, plump tone with quite a lot of harmonic bloom – not as warm a bloom as cedar, but certainly noticeable. This guitar, however, blows my expectations out of the water. For one thing, it's quiet. This is not



"Sticking an educated nose into the soundhole brings much more a sense of the forest than the glue factory"

TAYLOR 360E

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Taylor Guitars
Model: 360e 12-string dreadnought
RRP: £1,686
Body Size: Dreadnought
Made In: El Cajon, USA
Top: Tropical mahogany in satin finish
Back and Sides: Tasmanian blackwood
Bridge: Ebony
Neck: Tropical mahogany
Fingerboard: Ebony
Frets: 20
Tuners: Taylor nickel
Nut Width: 1 7/8"
Scale Length: 25 1/2"
Onboard Electrics: Taylor Expression System 2
Strings Fitted: Elixir Strings, Phosphor Bronze Light
Gig Bag/Case Included: Taylor Deluxe hardshell

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Classy, understated looks and a genteel tone
Cons: It won't be as loud and bassy as you're expecting – but maybe that's a 'Pro'?
Overall: A new breed of 12-string acoustics

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ★★★★½
Build Quality: ★★★★☆
Value for Money: ★★★★☆
5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

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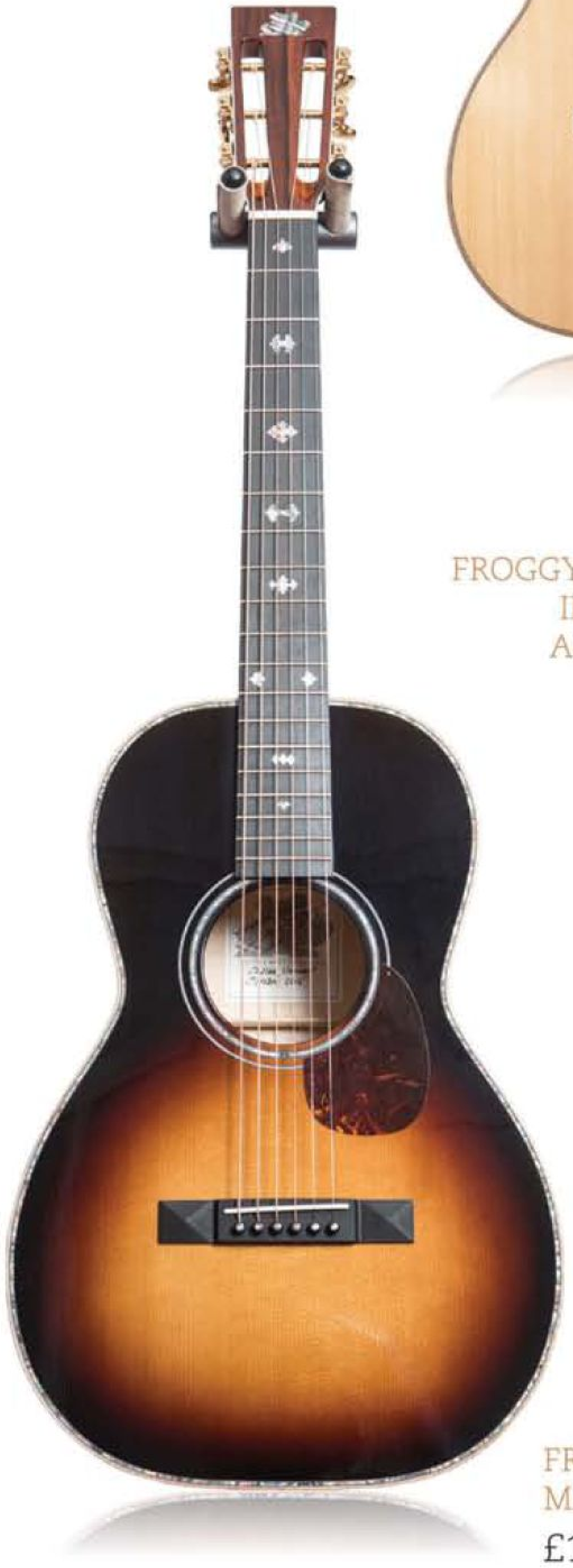

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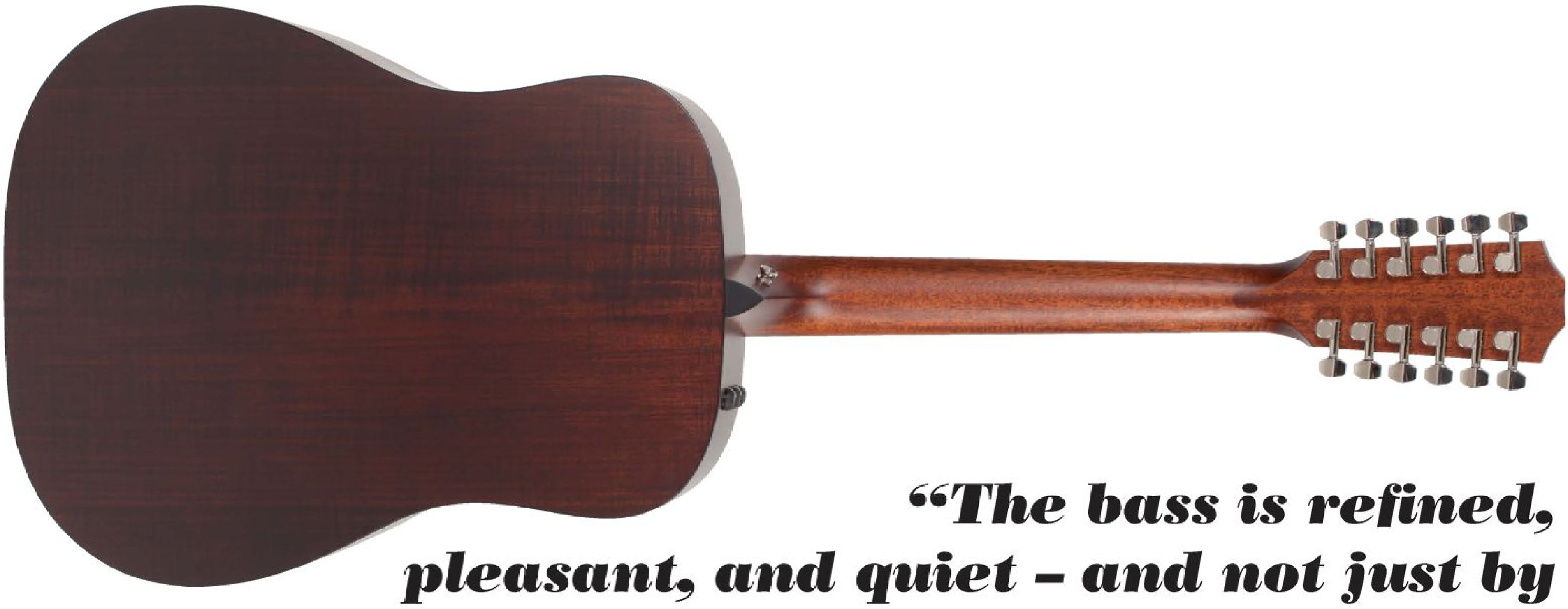
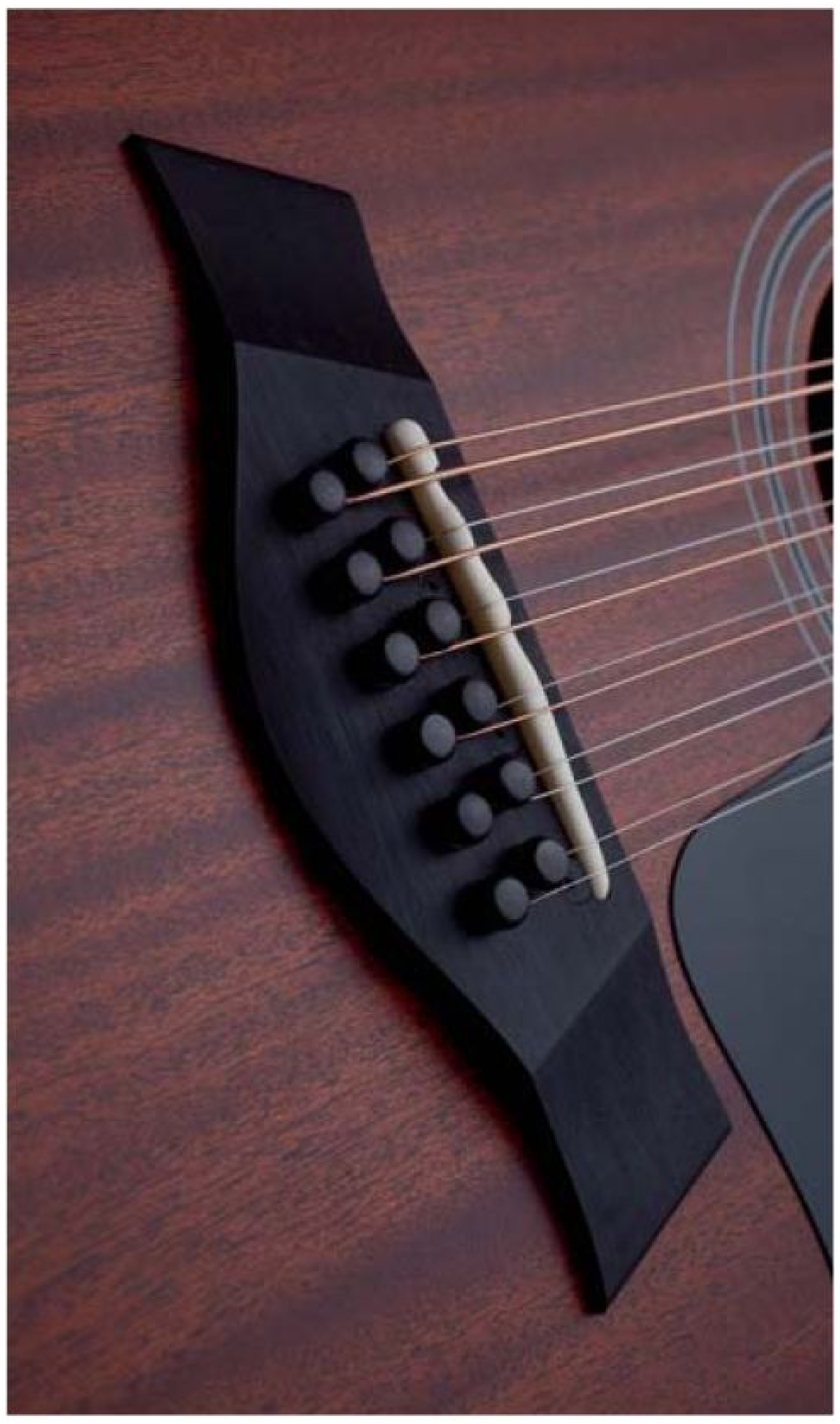


"The bass is refined, pleasant, and quiet – and not just by dreadnought standards either"



at all what I expect from a 12-string or a dreadnought, still less that combination. The bass is where this guitar diverges furthest from expectation, and it's no bad thing. Dreadnoughts risk being bass heavy, and on a 12-string, that can, in some circumstances, mean a really muddy tone. Here, the bass is refined, pleasant, and quiet – and not just by dreadnought standards either. The mid-tones do display some of the dark mahogany bloom I was expecting, but pairing with the koa-like blackwood produces a brighter, chiming tone in the upper mids and treble. It's no problem to strum it fairly hard indoors while the family are asleep, the volume being more in the parlour range than the dreadnought. Picked, the nuances of the tone, and particularly the blend of chiming treble and rich mid come through nicely. We'd suggest that, unless you're a busker, the quiet unplugged timbre of this guitar isn't an obstacle, and might even be a benefit. When used for performances, you're most often going to hear it through the onboard pickup, and the better balance displayed here than on most dreads may be a positive boon.

Plugged in, the Expression 2 seems to be at the upper end of the piezo spectrum, but maybe not quite the game changer Taylor hopes. While the dreaded quack is absent, the somewhat exaggerated punch isn't. That's not to say the amplified tone is at all bad – it's excellent, useable and easy to dial in – it's just not a new dimension for this particular reviewer.

Overall this Taylor 360e is good. Very good, in fact. But take it from me, it won't be what you're expecting. This is a subtle, genteel 12-string that lends itself to being delicately fingerpicked rather than thrashed. The looks won't please fans of bling, but, for this reviewer, Taylor has got them just right. The 360e feels like a pro instrument, rather than a wall queen. I would not recommend buying one of these sight unseen; go into a music shop and try one. It might change your view of 12-strings altogether… and dreadnoughts come to that. ■

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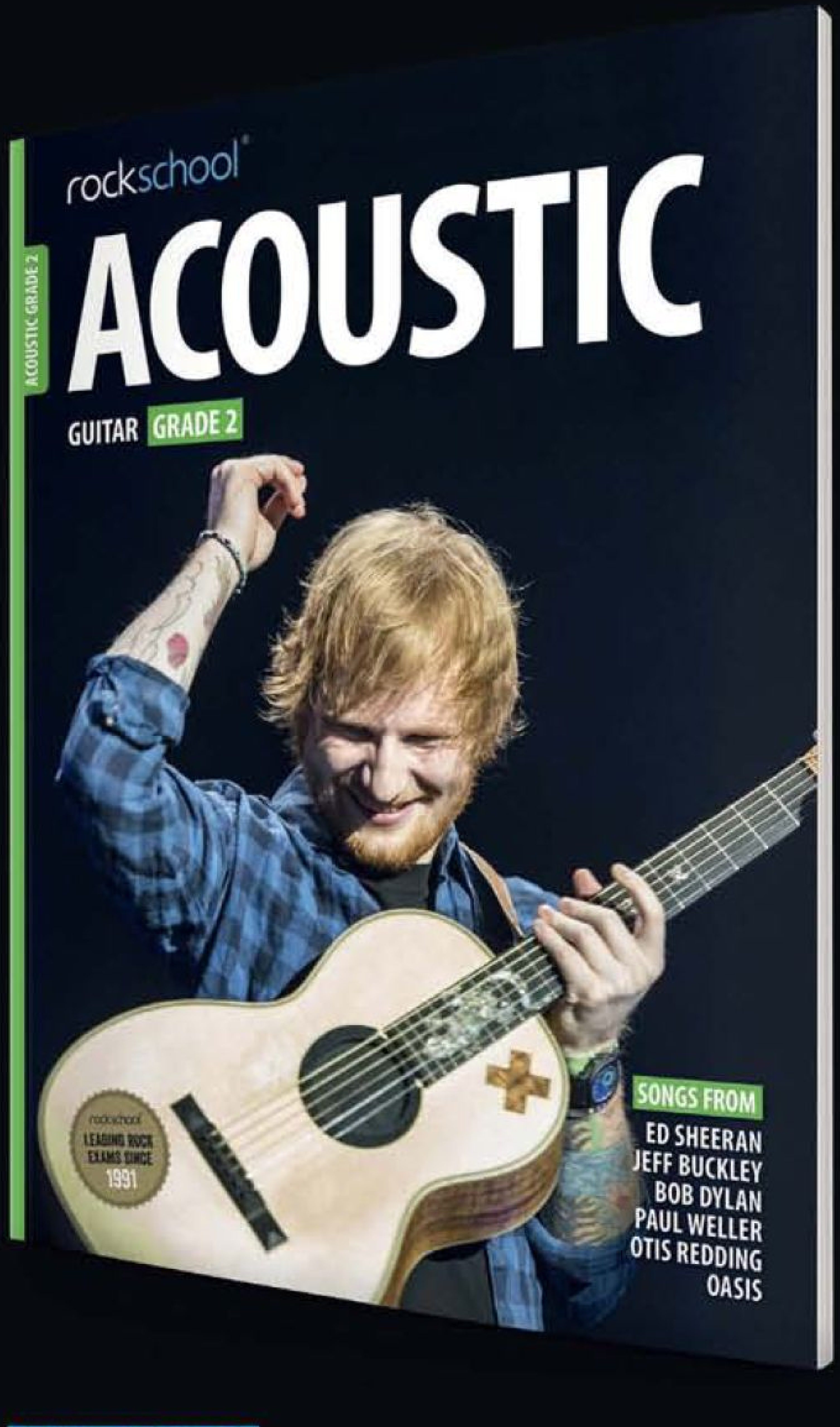

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RIVERSONG TRADITION CDN PERFORMER

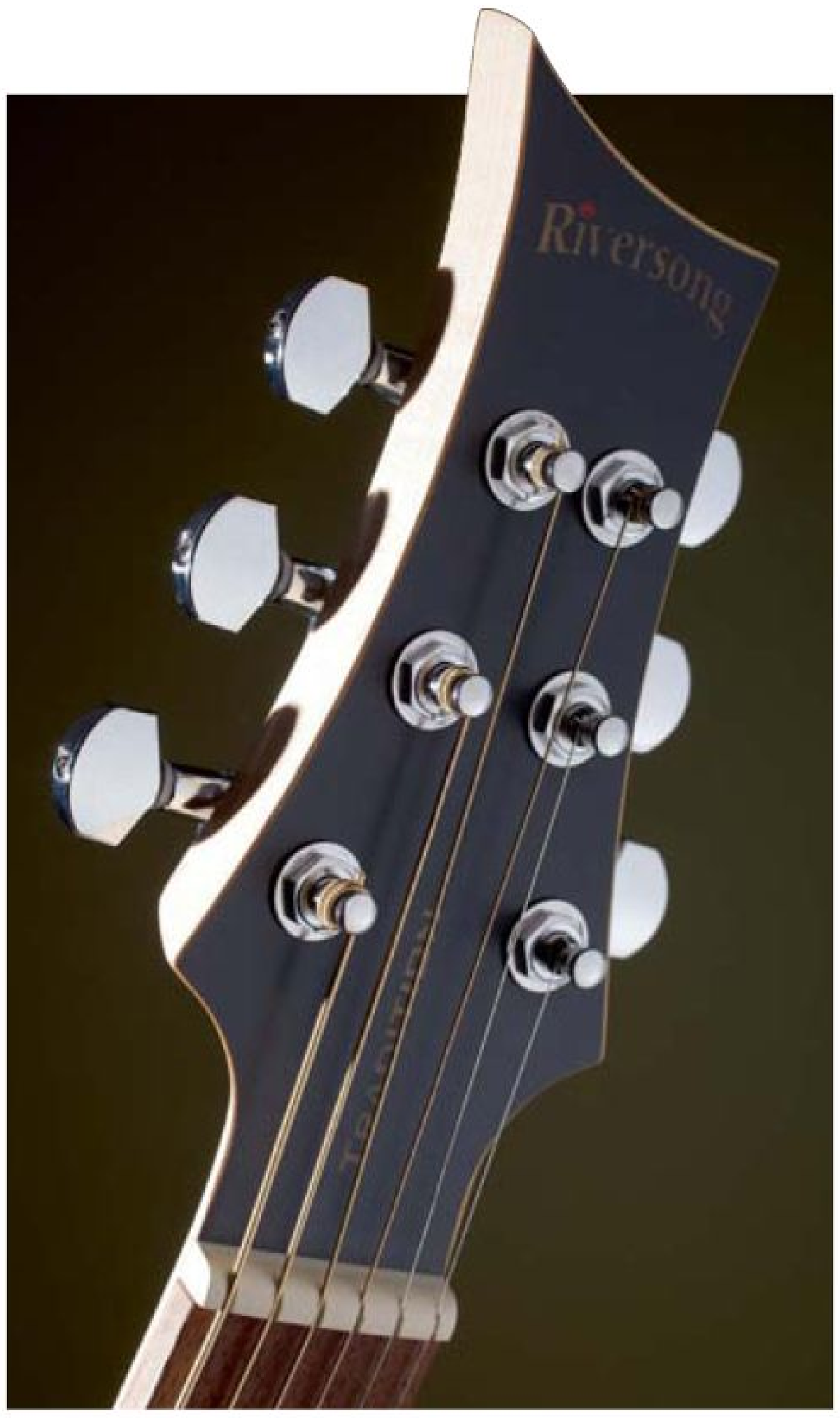
The "adjustable acoustic that plays like an electric", eh? Joel McIver taps into his inner Eddie Van Halen

WORDS: JOEL MCIVER **IMAGES:** RICHARD ECCLESTONE

You'll have read in recent issues of *Acoustic* about the frankly mindboggling technology that the Riversong luthiers, based in British Columbia, Canada, have sunk into their range of guitars, so no need to cover it all again. Suffice it to say that the chaps over there have come up with the crazy concept of 'Necknology', an adjustable acoustic neck with a variable angle relative to the strings and body.

Accessed via a socket underneath the body, the system enables the player to customise the action in a way that has previously been confined to raising or lowering bridge saddles or carving into the nut, both operations that can obviously only go so far and arguably have a detrimental effect on a guitar's tone. It's a little odd to look into the guitar and see a plank of wood running through it, perhaps, but bear with us here. The concept is enhanced with the removal of the internal bracing, allowing the top of the guitar to 'float' above the inner neck: this maximises output, ensures tonal balance, removes stress to the neck by effectively sending the string tension to the bottom of the body and makes you more handsome. Okay, maybe not that last one.

The price for all this clever R&D, which is not unadjacent to 1,700 quid, isn't outrageous for a guitar of this spec at this point in the market – but you obviously want it to work, and work pretty damn well, to be convinced of its value. Traditionalists will take some persuading, not helped by the unusual headstock (essentially an electric guitar set-up), the two-octave neck and the fact that a giant piece of wood, rather like a feedback buster, occupies the

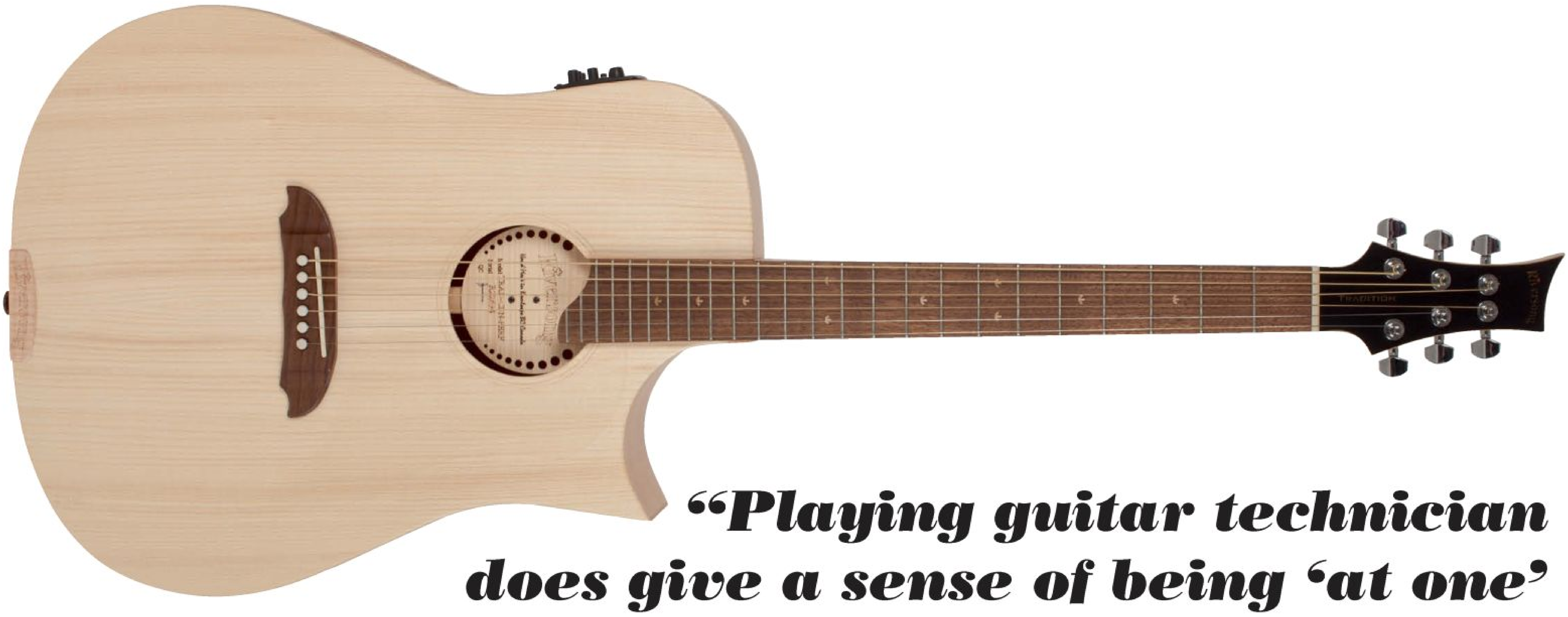


"If you're not strictly about traditional designs you're in for a treat... this guitar is a whole lot of fun to play"

main soundhole. Oh, and there's a second soundhole on the top, perfect for funnelling crumbs into the body if you choose to eat toast while playing it.

However, assuming you're not strictly about traditional designs and have read this far, you're in for a treat – because this guitar is a whole lot of fun to play. Even before you plug in via the standard or XLR sockets, you'll enjoy giving the Riversong an unamplified strum. The neck profile, a slim C/D shape, owes a lot to electric guitar design, permitting you to nip up and down the fretboard unimpeded by the sticky lacquer that so many acoustic makers dollop over their necks. The 19th fret is easily accessed thanks to the lower cutaway, itself a pointy job designed to appeal to guitarists of the rock persuasion, but getting up to the second octave will be a stretch, not least because the fretboard ends at the 22nd fret for the low E and A strings. In reality though, who plays those notes?

Simply put, this is one of the most playable acoustics to land on our doormat in quite some time. Does it really play like an electric, as the press release flippantly claims? Well, not exactly – but again, you won't mind: the Riversong has its own intrinsic character and tone that suffices quite nicely without any unnecessary comparisons. Plug in and you'll be rewarded with a full range of tones, in particular at the low end: unamplified, the guitar is not a bass-heavy instrument, so feel free to dial up the big sounds on the three-band B-Band T65 preamp. There's also a slider to mix the soundboard and undersaddle pickups; a notch control to ward off evil feedback demons; and a tuner, the last of



"Playing guitar technician does give a sense of being 'at one' with the instrument"

RIVERSONG
TRADITION CDN PERFORMER

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Riversong Guitars
Model: Tradition CDN Performer
RRP: £1,664
Body Size: Dreadnought
Made In: Canada
Top: Solid AAA Adirondack spruce
Back and Sides: Solid West Coast Sitka spruce
Bridge: Black walnut
Neck: Eastern hard rock maple (flat sawn)
Fingerboard: Black walnut
Frets: Medium nickel silver
Tuners: Graphtech Ratio enclosed
Nut Width: 42mm
Scale Length: 25.5"
Onboard Electrics: Dual Source B-Band w/ dual outputs
Strings Fitted: D'Addario EXP 16
Gig Bag/Case Included: Hardsoft case included

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Forward-thinking design, excellent build quality and tonewoods. Fantastic acoustic tone
Cons: More-than-usual metalwork will not appeal to some. Heavier than similar priced dreadnoughts
Overall: A well-made, great sounding guitar that refuses to conform to established thinking on how guitars should look and be constructed

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ★★★★½
Build Quality: ★★★★★
Value for Money: ★★★★☆
5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

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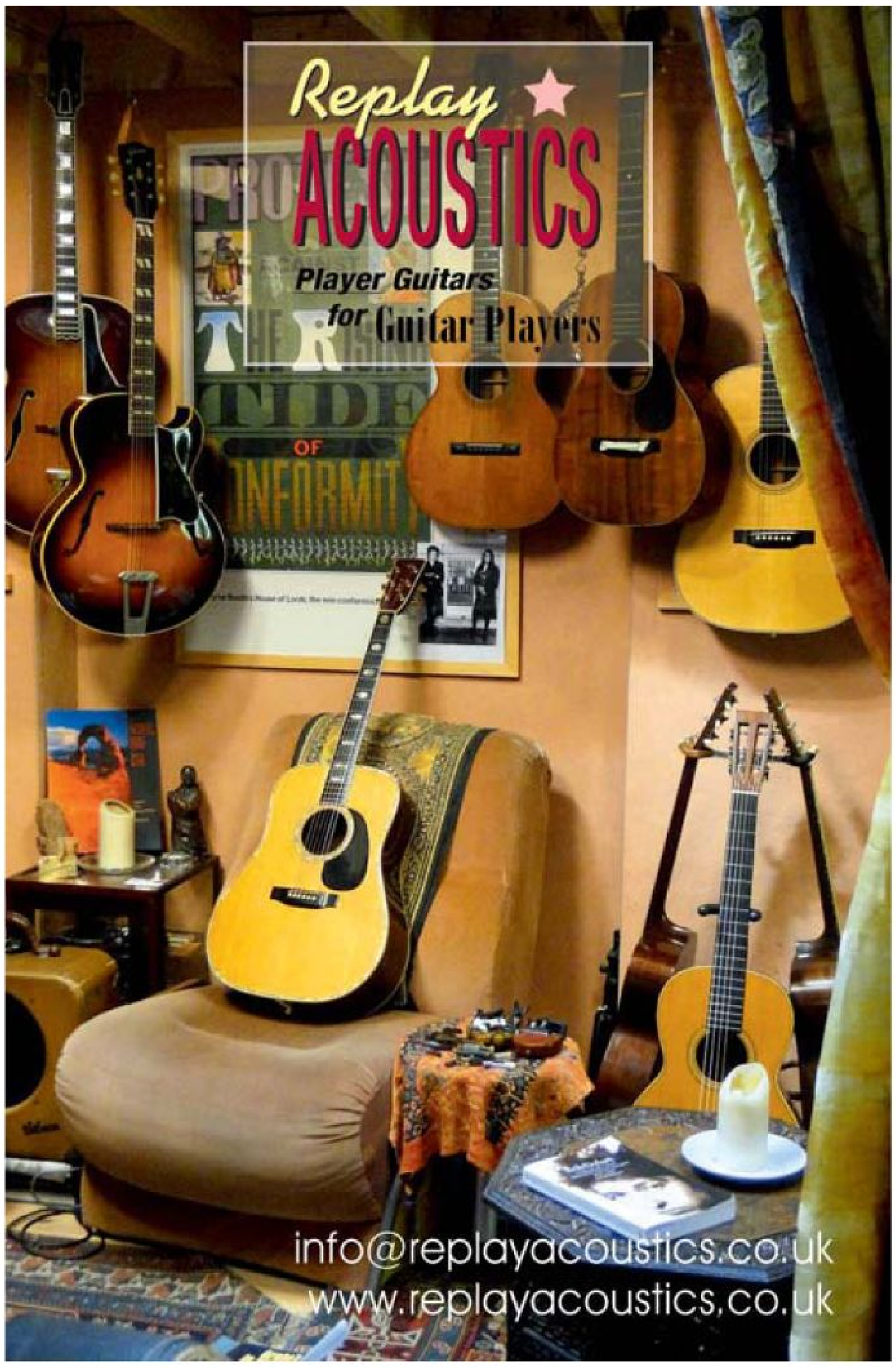
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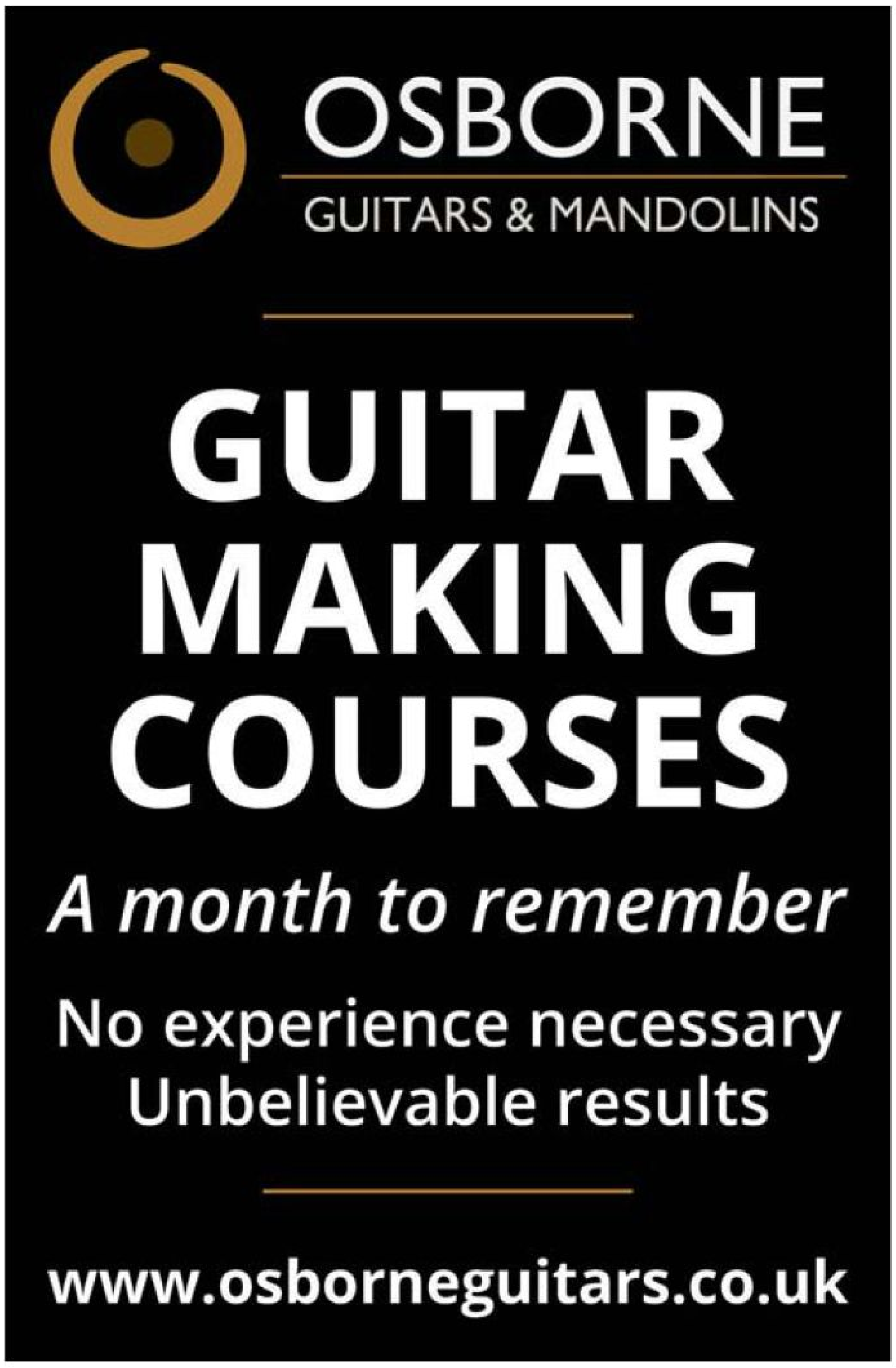
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"Simply put, this is one of the most playable acoustics to land on our doormat in quite some time"

which is particularly useful because when activated, the output is muted and an LED readout lights up. More to the point, you'll need the tuner after you start messing with the 'Necknological' neck. Now, where's that toolbox...?

It feels pretty weird to start unscrewing the essential components of a very expensive guitar, especially when it's not actually yours and has been flown over 4,000 miles just so you can play it – but hey, we'd be doing you a disservice if we didn't physically get to grips with Riversong's mad-scientist neck concept. So it's out with the Allen keys and off with the rear strap button (don't lose it, for God's sake). Fortunately, the key you need is the same size as the one that Ikea gives out free with its flatpack furniture. Don't pretend you haven't got at least five of them – we know we have.

Seeing the string action visibly rise and fall before your eyes is bizarre, but you'll soon be reassured by the smooth function of the system and its remarkable range – you can go from super-high slide height to buzzy, strings-asleep-on-the-fretboard clinginess in about 20 seconds. This system really does work, and as your Riversong builds up the air miles through all those ice-cold, low-pressure cargo holds and red-hot, humid clubs, the ability to let the string action 'breathe' without performing open heart surgery on the bridge saddles is bound to pay off sometime. You'll need to retune every time you adjust the neck height, but that's a small price to pay if you ask us, and playing guitar technician does give a sense of being 'at one' with the instrument.

Does the casual acoustic player need to invest in 'Necknology'? Maybe not – but if you're a pro, a semi-pro or just someone looking for a cool, futuristic investment, consider a visit to the Great White North and give Riversong the once-over. ■

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ACOUSTAJAM SOUNDBOARD EXCITER

Steve Harvey looks at a retrofit, Bluetooth-enabled device that turns your acoustic into a loudspeaker

WORDS: STEVE HARVEY **IMAGES:** MEGGIE WILSON

In its most basic form, the acoustic guitar is a box. Or, more accurately, a soundbox. Sonic vibrations created by metal or nylon strings under tension bounce around an acoustic guitar's body and, aided by the resonant qualities of the tonewoods, sound is produced and pushed out through the soundhole. Of course, the likes of Messrs Martin, Taylor and Collings would turn in their workshops at such a rudimental description of their craft, but for the likes of you and me, it's right on the money. But what if an acoustic's inherent sound-producing capabilities could be used for more than just the strings?

On review here is a product that pushes the boundaries of what an acoustic guitar's soundbox can be used for. The Acoustajam is an ingenious, retrofit device that opens up a whole new world of opportunities and possibilities for anyone with a standard, Bluetooth-equipped smartphone, tablet or modern MP3 player, where the acoustic guitar itself becomes the speaker. The Acoustajam effectively turns your acoustic guitar into a wireless music player, and it can be used for practice, performance or just jamming, without the need for any drilling, extra leads or additional amplification.

We took the opportunity to speak to the Acoustajam's designer, Darcy Gerrard. "Like most new ideas, the concept was something of an accident," he recalls. "I was messing around with some Wharfedale loud panel transducers, going round the shop [Hartnoll's Guitar Centre] with one connected to a hi-fi amplifier and touching them on various resonant surfaces. A work colleague was stood in front of me with an acoustic guitar. I touched the guitar with the loud panel and the sound was amazing. That's how the ball got rolling."

In discussing the early challenges the project faced, Gerrard recalls the difficulties of developing components that would fit and function inside an acoustic guitar. "I had to try and develop a suitable low-voltage amplifier. Due to the number of batteries required, this was very difficult. I then came across Class D amplifiers. They're small, low voltage and have lots of power. Early prototypes weren't Bluetooth enabled and so we were trying to find a way of mounting the device, be it smartphone, MP3 player or whatever, on the shoulder of the guitar."

Side mounting devices turned out to be a non-starter and so Gerrard began to look into the possibilities opened up by Bluetooth

ACOUSTAJAM SOUNDBOARD EXCITER

RRP: £69.99

CONTACT DETAILS

www.acoustajam.com

www.stringandthings.com

"The Acoustajam will open up a whole new world of possibilities for buskers (or, indeed, anyone playing outdoors)"

capabilities. Streaming from smartphones or similar became the way forward, with Chinese factories approached for the supply of certain components. Though final assembly, testing and packing is carried out in the UK.

Creating a device that fit inside the soundhole required a specialist CAD designer to create a casing that would ensure sufficient space for the electronics but also follow the arc of the soundhole. From the point of conception to the first prototypes has taken two years.

When asked to expand on the Acoustajam's functionality, Gerrard told us: "The transducer works in a similar way to how the guitar strings react with the guitar's soundboard. When you strike the strings on an acoustic, the soundboard transmits the resonance and volume throughout the whole body. By playing music through the transducer, the Acoustajam uses the guitar's soundboard in the same way."

The unit requires an initial charge, which takes four hours, using a micro-USB cable. After that, plug in the soundboard exciter, pair it up with your smartphone, tablet or laptop via Bluetooth, and play some music. While the music is playing, gently hold the transducer on the top of the guitar's soundboard, usually just behind the bridge, to find the sweet-spot for the best sound. Having found the best location, the transducer needs to be fixed to the same place but on the inside of the guitar (an adhesive pad is included), so long as struts and/or bracing are avoided. We found it easiest to fix the transducer with the strings removed, but it might not be necessary depending on your guitar. Once the transducer is in place, plug the short cable into the back of the module and affix to the inside of the soundhole using the self-adhesive pad as supplied. And that's it! Having paired the devices, hit play and away you go.

When the Acoustajam's battery runs down, the sound will become distorted, or the unit will cut-out altogether. The lithium-polymer battery has built-in, deep discharge protection, so will cut its supply if the voltage is too low.

When playing/streaming the music to your guitar, the resulting sound isn't studio quality, but you wouldn't expect that. And to some degree, that's missing the point. The appeal of the Acoustajam is that anything you have on your phone, and by extension anything you find on the internet, can be Bluetooth-ed to your guitar to play along with. This makes it great for learning new pieces or solos, or simply for playing along to a drum beat, click track or bass-line. The Acoustajam will open up a whole new world of possibilities for buskers (or, indeed, anyone playing outdoors) as they can now have pretty much anything for accompaniment. I have a number of backing tracks on my phone and have used them with the Acoustajam to practise soloing, and I'm loving every minute of it!

The reasonable price of £69.99, the ease of installation and the wide range of applications available to it make the Acoustajam something of a no-brainer. It's fun, easy to use and can be used as a learning/practice tool too. Highly recommended. ■

ROADIE TUNER

Here's a new product for your gig-bag that might just change the way you change your strings… and how you look at alternative tunings

WORDS: NICK ROBBINS **IMAGES:** MEGGIE WILSON

If there's one thing we love at Acoustic Towers, it's the opportunity to test a product that claims to do something just a little bit out of the ordinary. The Roadie Tuner from Band Industries is such a product. Put simply, it's a Swiss Army knife for your guitar – or as company founder Hassane Slaibi says: "[It's] like having a guitar tech in your case at all times". It's a string winder, automatic tuner, tuning bank and guitar doctor all in one. And it's all rather clever too.

The product gained much of its initial funding on the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter and – with the two brains behind the Roadie combining a background in mechanical and computer engineering – it shouldn't come as a shock to learn that behind this simple black box is some rather nifty technology. You'll begin to appreciate it when you download the accompanying (and free) Roadie Tuner app (which you can find on the Google Play store for Android or on the app store for Apple devotees). Once you've paired your Roadie device to your phone via Bluetooth, which is comfortingly idiot-proof, it's time to add your instrument to your Roadie settings. Again, it's a simple task – click acoustic guitar (though it also works for electric guitar and classical guitar, too), select the number of strings on the guitar you want to tune and you'll end up at the string page (see the screenshot, *bottom right*). For tuning the guitar, you can either use the adapter that comes with the Roadie, which will send your guitar signal through your phone's headphone jack, or you can use your phone's in-built mic, so it'll work whether your acoustic has electronics or not. You play each string in turn and the app then sends a signal via Bluetooth to the Roadie device, which you hold over the respective tuning peg, to turn the button and bring the string into tune. It's a fascinating system and, we can confirm, supremely accurate – up to three times more accurate than the human ear, according to Band Industries. In fact, once I'd tuned up my first guitar I took the opportunity to put the Roadie through its paces on a guitar that needed restringing. First off, I used the touch controls on the side of the Roadie to unwind the strings, threaded the new string through, wound it up to slight tension, then set the Roadie to work on getting me to standard tuning. The process took no time at all, because, in all honesty, I wasn't doing any work. I was just getting the string in the right place and plucking it occasionally to allow the Roadie app to register a note that needed correcting. Navigate through the easy-to-use app towards the 'Instrument Doctor' and it'll even tell you what condition your string is in and when you last changed it.

ROADIE TUNER
RRP: £84
CONTACT DETAILS
www.roadietuner.com

The Roadie tuner is, in my view, the complete package. I'll admit that I was reticent to let it loose on an expensive guitar when I first used it, testing it instead on a bruised and battered Yamaha F310, but I have since used it on every guitar I've had in my hands – acoustic and electric. It's a real boon to be able to switch between tunings at the drop of a hat. The app has a bank of common alternate tunings, and you can even add in custom ones. I've jumped around all over the shop, from the familiarity of standard, to DADGAD, via the twinkly emo-ness of DAEAC#E and back again, and the Roadie hasn't missed a beat. Plus, I was more confident stopping off at every tuning I knew because re-stringing was now such a painless process.

The battery life on the device is surprisingly good, and you can charge it via USB, so it's not an arduous process at all. The app can hold a library of guitars and, once the initial calibration is complete – during which you have to tune each string in sequence – you can tune individual strings or all of them at once by just moving the device on to the next tuning head (from lowest string to highest) when the app tells you to. And don't worry if the technology baffles you slightly, there's a tutorial within the app that explains everything in plain English. I did suffer a couple of crashes when I first downloaded the app, but it has since updated and seems a lot more stable.

Without wanting to sound hyperbolic, this device has improved my guitar playing experience: I've experimented with tunings that I otherwise wouldn't have touched and I'm restringing my guitars more regularly and far quicker than I used to. The Roadie has become invaluable to me as a guitar player, and at £84, it's not out of reach for anyone. It's clever, innovative technology making guitarists' lives easier and at a reasonable cost, too. What's not to love? ■

Artist: Ronald & Josh - **Hidden Charms**

Photo courtesy of: Ben Gibson Photography

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SANTA CRUZ GUITAR COMPANY GHOST OAK GUITAR

Santa Cruz Guitar Company's Ghost Oak; a guitar made from 8,000 year old oak and 3,000 year old spruce, was first seen in a glass display cabinet at NAMM in January, and we couldn't help but be intrigued. Alison Richter speaks to Richard Hoover for the full story behind this extraordinary guitar

WORDS: ALISON RICHTER **IMAGES:** SANTA CRUZ GUITAR COMPANY

Richard Hoover, owner and founding luthier of Santa Cruz Guitar Company, has a favourite saying: "We always get more than we give." It has proven true time and again throughout the company's 40-year history, but perhaps never in quite so unique and monumental a fashion as the Ghost Oak guitar, built from 8,000-year-old oak and 3,000-year-old Sitka spruce.

The oak set was gifted to Hoover by Roman Zajicek, a master luthier from the Czech Republic, with whom Hoover had developed a friendship over years of being booth mates at the Frankfurt Musik Messe trade show. "I got to know him – we had dinner a few times and talked shop," he says. "We developed a relationship over time and saw the benefits of helping each other out. I was able to get him a beautiful ancient redwood guitar top, which comes from our area. This wasn't an exchange by any means, but when he came across this ancient oak, he thought of me and sent me a set."

The wood had been buried at the bottom of a sand mine, hours away from Zajicek's shop. Glacial upheaval, plate tectonics and volumes of moving water are believed to have created and moved the sand under which the oak was buried; aside from gradual oxidation, the wood was intact. Zajicek was able to get enough wood for three guitar sets, built one, and brought it to Frankfurt. "I was so taken with it that I think that's what inspired him to send me some," says Hoover.

He kept the oak next to his desk at SCGC for almost three years, looked at it daily, and contemplated its future. He took it to some lectures and exhibitions, and kept it in plain sight at his workstation while awaiting inspiration. "Honest to goodness, I couldn't come to terms with whether or not I was the guy that should use it," he says. "It's so one of a kind and so rare. It was kind of like the Hippocratic oath: 'Do no harm'. If you don't know what you're doing, maybe you shouldn't use stuff like this. Of course, we have 40 years of experience, so that's silly, but I didn't know how to properly use this, both out of respect for its provenance and the singularity of it, so it took me a long time to have that come together."

Resolution came when Hoover received a call from another friend, Brent Cole, of Alaska Specialty Woods, from whom SCGC purchases their reclaimed spruce. "All of the spruce we use for guitar tops comes from secondary sources rather than living trees, so Brent is always on the scout for things for us," says Hoover. The Sitka spruce had also been part of a climate shift. As the frozen ground slowly thawed and receded, Cole saw the roots, unearthed the tree, called Hoover immediately, and sent him that set. "I looked at the colour of both of these woods, and they were so similar that I thought they belonged together," says Hoover. "The fact that it's our 40th anniversary made me reach a tipping point. I saw the chance to put together a dream guitar, and something that represented our combined knowledge over the past 40 years to really do a showpiece."

The oak and spruce, which were carbon-dated to verify authenticity of age, arrived in the form in which SCGC normally buys guitar wood: back, top, and sides had been cut into two pieces. "My instructions to everybody that was handling it – and as you can imagine, we had the most experienced people work with it – was, 'Don't do anything different. Don't change your methods, because that seems like a sure way to add a variable that could end up wrecking it,'" says Hoover. "Nonetheless, it made everybody super-vigilant and a little anxious because

there's no replacement for this. We got enough materials for exactly one guitar.

"If you have 10 of the same guitar to do, it's efficient to run 10 pieces at a time through the same setting on a tool, but in this case we decided to treat it individually, and that was a good idea because it acted differently," he says. "The oak wasn't fossilised or petrified or degraded by the conditions it had been in, but it was different. It didn't act with the same density, or we didn't get the same surface finish, that we would with the woods we're used to, so it did take some care and we did go slowly on that. One of the biggest concerns was bending it into the shape of the guitar, because there is no reference on it. No one has any comparative analysis on how this 8,000-year-old oak bends in comparison to modern guitar wood. Luckily, everything went smoothly."

With decades of experience using spruce, but little reference with oak, there was an aspect of the unknown regarding the outcome of tonality. "The spruce is the biggest contributor to the guitar, and that was actually preserved and put into the deep freeze, so it wasn't degraded at all," says Hoover. "It changed colour, and as wood gets old, we get the benefits of the resins polymerising and hardening and getting more resonant, so we certainly could tell in the piece before we used it that it had great potential for sound. The oak is another thing. Oak isn't a traditional guitar-making wood, so with the exception of maybe the turn of the last century, where a lot of cheap catalogue guitars were made out of oak, we didn't have a body of knowledge about what oak is supposed to sound like. Its density was much like modern mahogany, and that was my hope."

"The overall sound of the guitar has a combination of Sitka spruce and mahogany. It retains some of the warmth of tone of things like rosewood, but it's got a little more clarity and separation between the notes than some of the super-bright woods like maple. When we were done, there was an element of wonder about what it was going to sound like, but we were delightfully surprised. It was a great relief that it sounds awesome. We got the sounds of

the guitar that we would intend to make, plus the sounds of really old wood. It's very rich and full. We didn't compromise any sounds by using the woods."

While most SCGC guitars take 14 weeks to build, from start to finish, the Ghost Oak required the better part of a year of painstaking work. "Usually, everything is pretty straightforward," says Hoover. "Everybody here is an expert in handling the guitars and doing the processes, so they don't require standing around and thinking about it, but this one required a lot of that. One of the strong things I wanted to adhere to was that the guitar design wasn't burdened by the expectations of others, let's say a customer, a store, or even other people in the shop. I always value their opinions and include them in design issues, but with this, I wanted to think about it without worrying what other people thought it should be."

He chose snakewood, an exotic wood used for violin bows, for the decorative bindings and ebony fingerboard details. "It was the perfect fit cosmetically," he says. "I didn't want to do anything that detracted from the natural beauty of the woods, because that's the story. It would be disrespectful to think that you could improve on that by decorative work. It had to showcase the woods. But, on the other hand, the overall look of it had to be very expensive or desirable, because that's the kind of respect I wanted for it. I wanted people to do a double take at the look of the guitar, and then the process of discovering what it was made out of and how the design worked. The snakewood gave it a supernatural look, and at the same time it made it look elegant. We plan to make a lot of noise with it, and it had to look awesome. It couldn't be, 'That's an ugly guitar, but at least it's old wood.' There's some pride in there too."

With the body assembled, Hoover faced the challenge of adding the right neck, and finding something both tonally and aesthetically compatible. He had initial concerns that mahogany might distract from the ancient woods, but decided on a piece from the 1950s that proved to be a perfect fit. "It was a beautiful piece, and the density was appropriate for what

we wanted this guitar to sound like," he says. "We work with the density of the neck to either encourage vibrations to enter into it, giving the guitar a more open, airy sound, or we use a higher density to block the vibrations and give the guitar more focus. The wood is something I took out of my collection. There's no amazing story with that particular one, other than it was something that had been in a wood shop since the 1950s and we got it. The shape of the neck is consistent with the body size that we used, which is kind of a retro feel. It's a little bit of a V shape, which people like for fingerstyle playing."

The depth of the oak and the almost iridescent top of the guitar have yet to be fully captured in photographs, according to Hoover. Depending on available light and how the guitar is turned, it morphs from icy silver to bronze. To preserve the wood's natural colour and beauty, the Ghost Oak was treated with a clear finish. "We protected it with something that protects the surface from finger oils or wine spills, but also is meant to enhance the sounds," he says. "Imagine cotton fibres dissolved in a solvent. Cotton is cellulose, and we get clear liquid cellulose that can be sprayed on the guitar to give it a clear coat. Cellulose is what trees are made of, and on a microscopic level, the coating looks like the structure of the spruce itself, so it's a compatible resonance. There are 12 coats that add up and are sanded and polished to a 6000th of an inch; that's our standard for the sound and not being too thick to dampen that.

"I didn't want to do anything that detracted from the natural beauty of the woods… It would be disrespectful to think that you could improve on that"

"The growing tree, if you can imagine, is like a bundle of drinking straws, and the nutrients go up and down through those," he says. "When you cut a board out of that tree, if you were to split that structure, all the holes would come out of the ends of the board. It doesn't happen like that through gravity, wind, however the tree twists and turns, so when you cut a board out, all of those little holes come out all over the surface. Those little holes would make finishing very difficult because either they would drink up the finish, or the finish would retract around those holes and you would never get a flat surface.

"We put a compound that we literally rub on the guitar to fill up those little holes, sand that off, and finish it. It changes the colour of the wood, and in some cases that's desirable. In this case we didn't want to change the colour at all, so we had to eliminate that possibility by filling these pores with a clear compound to try to avoid that. When we did that, it looked awful. We had to go back and pull this out of each pore, and what is there? A thousand? Ten thousand? We literally went back with a needle and an air gun, picked them out, blew them out, went back and filled them with a clear epoxy that goes into the tiny dots, and then we sanded off the rest. So there were two or three attempts to get the colour right, and that took a lot of time. I don't know if that makes us sound smart or stupid, but it was painstaking for sure!"

The Ghost Oak made its debut at the 2016 winter NAMM show, where it remained on display inside a glass case and became an immediate showstopper. "One of our prime messages is that you can build the best stuff in the world without having to compromise your good citizenship," says Hoover. "We can use reclaimed wood and make the best things. Here's a guitar that's crazy expensive, really beautiful, and all the woods are reclaimed. Pretty extreme, but it started the conversation."

The guitar was purchased before it was finished, and will become a treasured possession within a family of curators. "They have done a lot of good work as far as preservation of art and antique musical instruments," says Hoover. "Its vision is it will get loaned out for recording, along the lines of a Stradivarius violin. You don't really own that violin; it's owned by institutions and benefactors and gets loaned out to symphonies. That's how I hope to see this guitar. I hope that it will build a legacy through recorded music." ■

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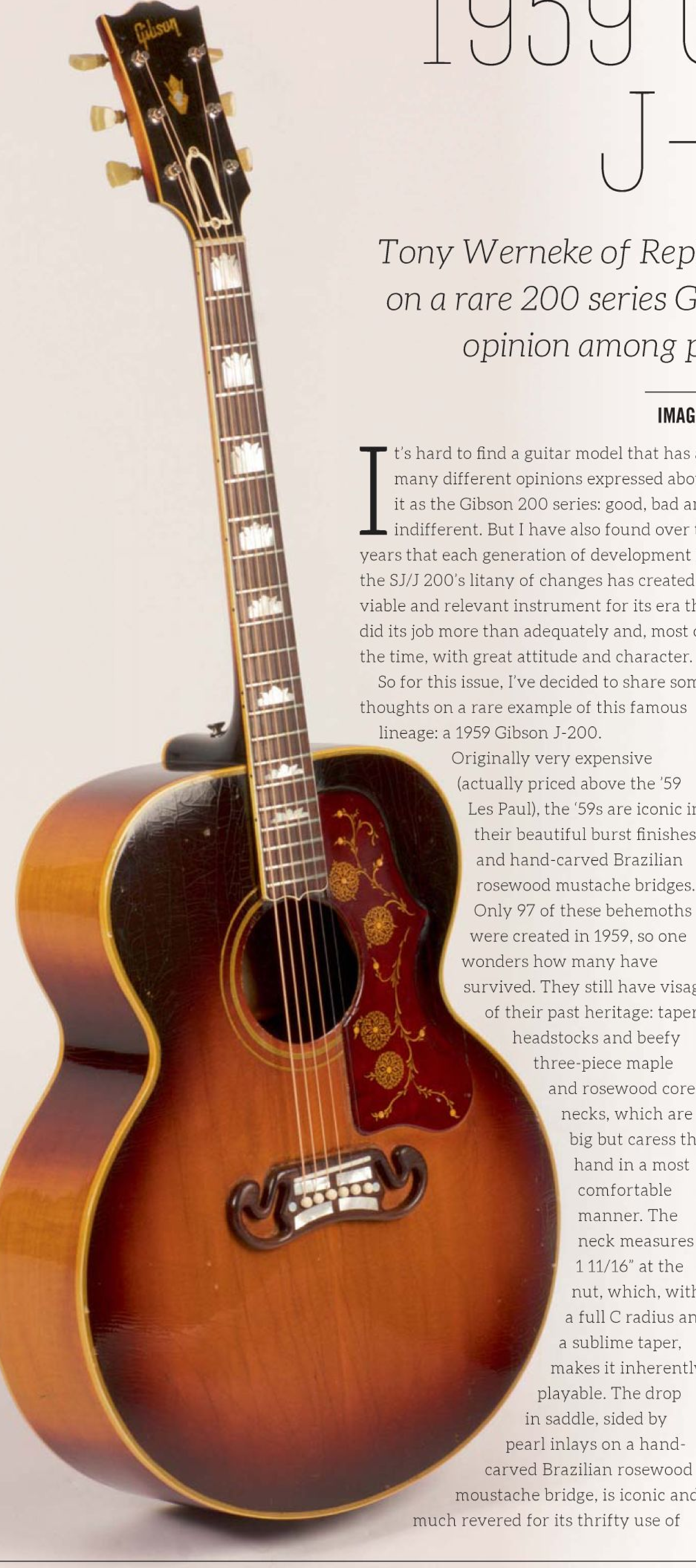
1959 GIBSON J-200

Tony Werneke of Replay Acoustics gets his hands on a rare 200 series Gibson – a series that divides opinion among players like few others

IMAGES: MATT SMITH



It's hard to find a guitar model that has as many different opinions expressed about it as the Gibson 200 series: good, bad and indifferent. But I have also found over the years that each generation of development in the SJ/J 200's litany of changes has created a viable and relevant instrument for its era that did its job more than adequately and, most of the time, with great attitude and character.

So for this issue, I've decided to share some thoughts on a rare example of this famous lineage: a 1959 Gibson J-200.

Originally very expensive (actually priced above the '59 Les Paul), the '59s are iconic in their beautiful burst finishes and hand-carved Brazilian rosewood mustache bridges. Only 97 of these behemoths were created in 1959, so one wonders how many have survived. They still have visages of their past heritage: tapered headstocks and beefy three-piece maple and rosewood core necks, which are big but caress the hand in a most comfortable manner. The neck measures 1 11/16" at the nut, which, with a full C radius and a sublime taper, makes it inherently playable. The drop in saddle, sided by pearl inlays on a hand-carved Brazilian rosewood moustache bridge, is iconic and much revered for its thrifty use of materials and its non-invasive footprint, along with its originality of design.

The solid figured maple rims and back are mastergrade quality and have mellowed to a sweet, honey coloured patination while the spruce top is a beautifully painted sunset plank that is a visual delight. The rims, neck and back of the guitar are burst as well, which is a considerable upgrade that not many Gibsons possess. The Brazilian fingerboard is pearl inlaid with the classic 'cloud' motif and bound as well. The hand carved floral pickguard perfectly complements the coloured patterns that the rest of the guitar possesses. The black enameled bound headstock with the inlaid pearl Keystone and Gibson logos are all supported by the classic Kluson single line 'snot green' tulip head gilt tuners. So it's a stunner, yes, but what does it sound like?

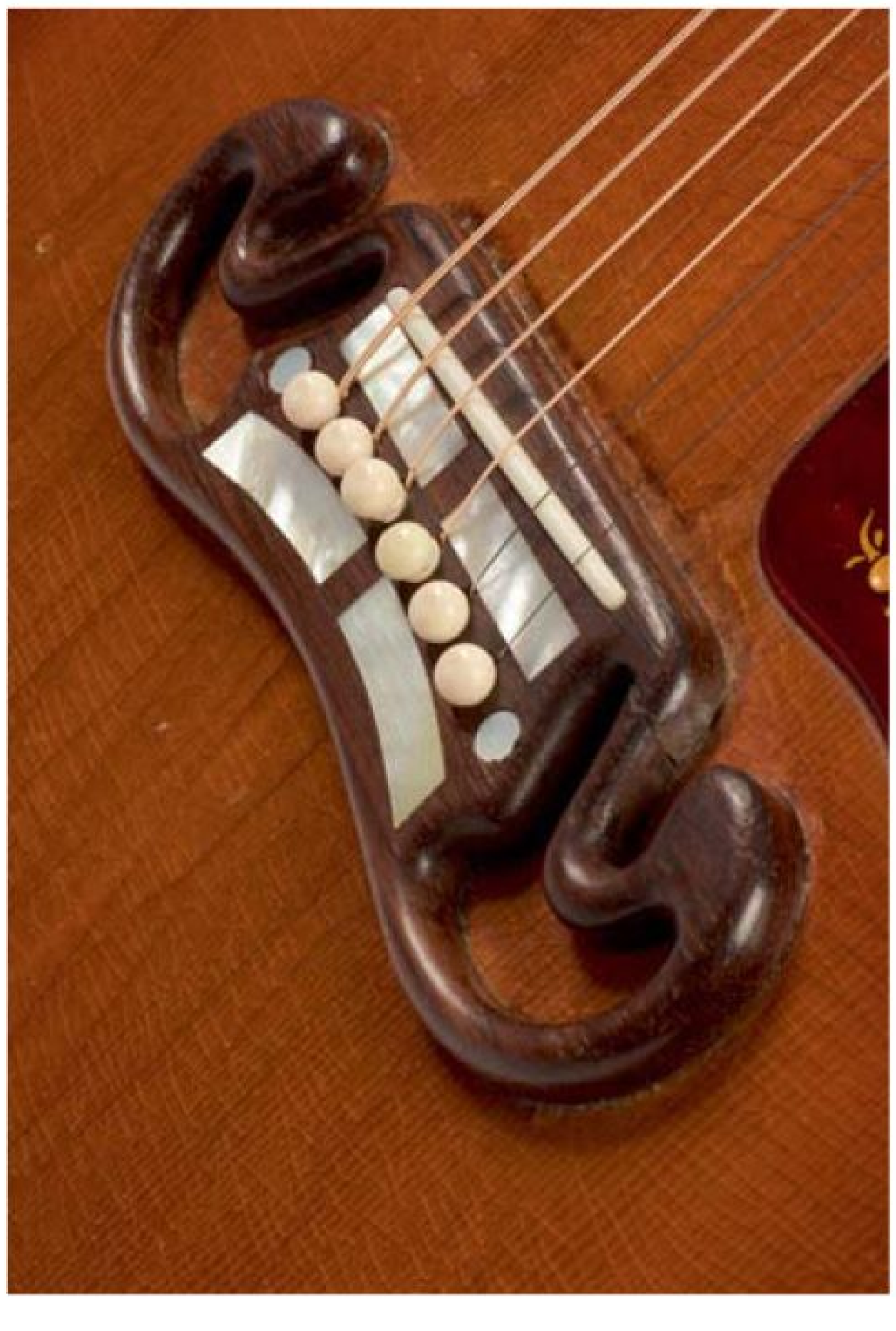
I've had 200 series Gibsons from 1950 through the 60s and they all have their own particular sound. The early SJs from the first few years of the 50s have forward shifted bracing built much lighter than the later cousins. Add to this a much thinner neck than the later 50s examples and these guitars have a sound that is more like a "great acoustic guitar" rather than what I have come to expect to hear from a classic 200. Super loud and fat, they sound more like a great dreadnought than a maple bodied jumbo, which means they are incredible instruments, but to my ear not classic 200s.

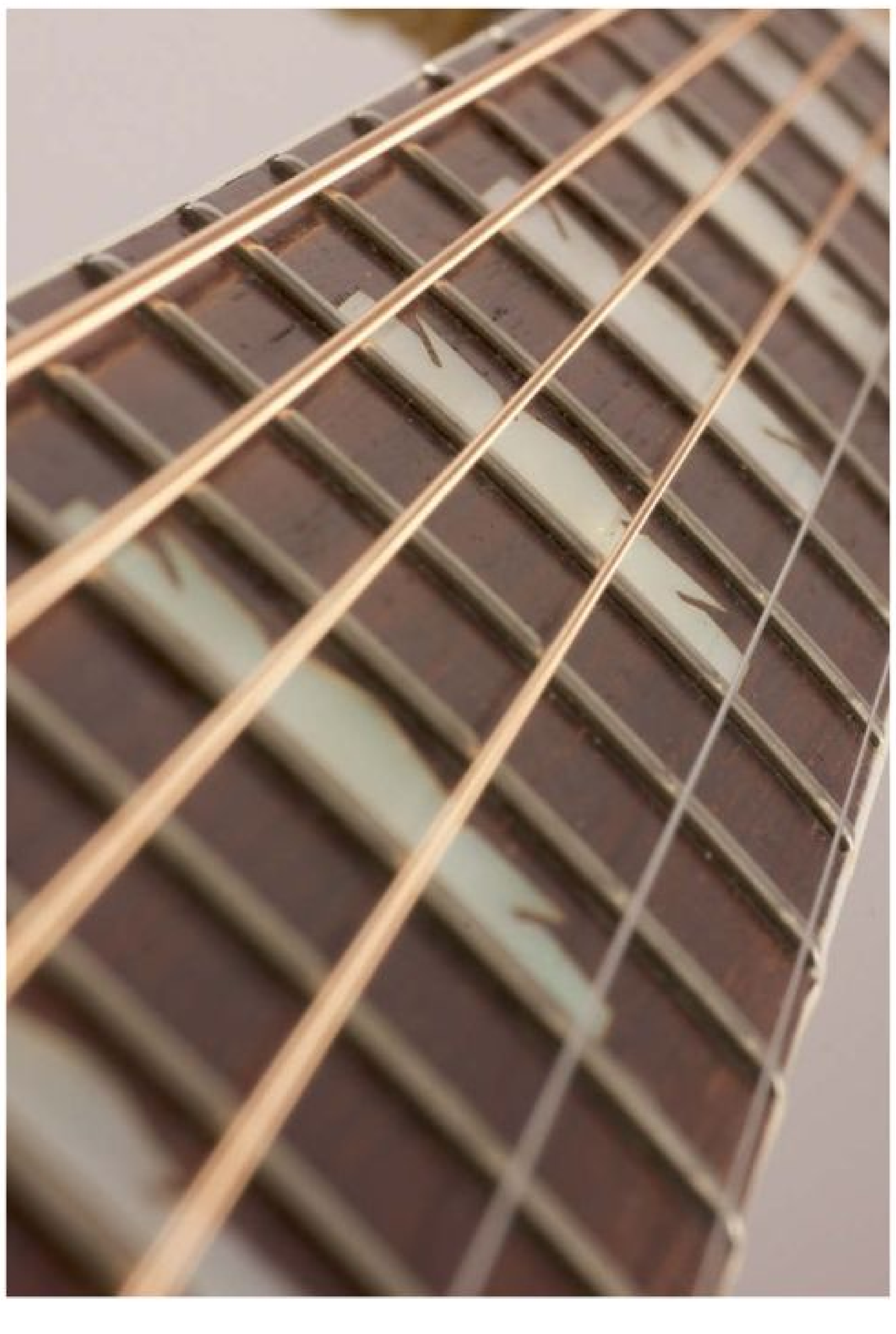
Fast forward to the 60s and we find changes in construction and design that have earned this era of 200s the name of 'Whispering Giants'. And as that may be true in relation to their predecessors, they are creations of their moment and do just what they were supposed to do: be substantial rhythm guitars for music performed by musicians not unlike the Everly Brothers. Boxy, thumpy and dry, they make incredible rhythm machines to back

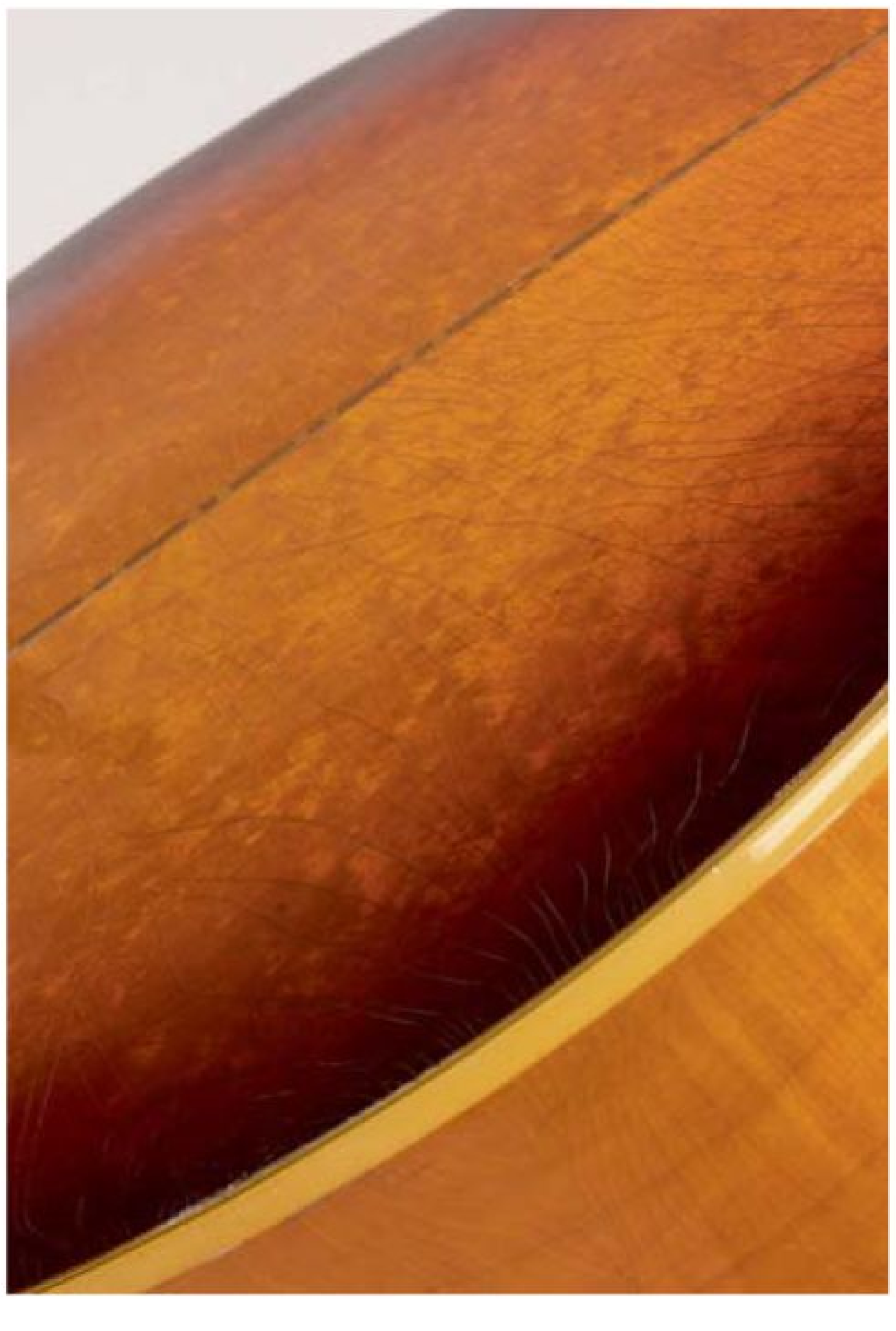
"To my ear, it is the absolute classic sounding and looking J-200...Voluminous waves of sound emanate from its soundhole with warm sustaining tones that are full of harmonics and backtones"

up vocals and to drive the music from a back seat. We as players simply need to put them in perspective to understand their contribution to their long lineage.

So, what about the late 50s J-200? To my ear, it is the absolute classic sounding and looking J-200. It's still obviously a maple bodied guitar but it presents that characteristic in its best light. Voluminous waves of sound emanate from it with warm sustaining tones that are full of harmonics and backtones. The box is braced in a way as to balance the sound in an even and enduringly responsive manner. The bass is prodigiously present with a rigorous mid-range and trebles that are ever present and clear but never strident. Fat and controlled with a warm richness that melts the heart. This is in my book what we all wished our 200 sounded like. The late 50s generation of J-200 is the classic era of the big maple box when it comes to our visual and sonic depictions of Emmy Lou Harris and her big 200 strapped around her neck. She didn't just play it for the looks. And neither did Johnny Cash, or Eric Clapton, or Pete Townshend or Neil Young. ■







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EDWIN BEASANT

STYLE…(FOLK)

Based in Stockport, I play guitar with traditional/folk band, Pilgrims' Way. Tom Kitching (fiddle and mandolin), Lucy Wright (fiddle, Jew's harp, vocals) and I originally formed the band in 2010, and after producing our first EP and album, Jon Loomes (concertina, guitar, hurdy gurdy, cittern and vocals) joined us in 2012. I sit in on electric, acoustic and bass guitars, mandola, contra bass and octave fiddle, plus melodeon, percussion, trombone, bugle and harmonica. Our second album, *Red Diesel*, comes out in March and features over 40 instruments. It's been five years since our first – it took that long to crystallise – and it's more confident, almost brash in places, and a progression. Between the band members, there's a broad taste in musical genres, and we wanted a little of that to come through. My favourite track? 'Boston City', because of its sheer, cheerful bounce and huge amount of fun. My regular guitar, and my favourite is a Zemaitis-style six-string tailpiece acoustic in bocote with a spruce top. Made by Colin Kendall and Emma Kendall Lea, it has astonishing sustain and depth for a smaller bodied guitar. Emma specifically made the neck to fit my grip, hand shape and playing style – fingerstyle, quite close to clawhammer in some ways – and it's so relaxing to play. It also has a distinctive tone and is indestructible, always in tune out of the box. It goes to every gig with me and is absolutely the hardest working guitar I own. I use an LR Baggs Anthem internal pickup/mic set and an LR Baggs DI, but nothing extra apart from an occasional A/B box when I'm using more than one instrument. On the electrics, I use an H&K TubeMeister Full House and a 1x10 converted Watkins Westminster, along with a Strymon El Capistan tape delay, and a Mad Professor Silver Spring reverb. Future plans? We're working up new material for the next Pilgrims' Way album, and getting ready to get back on the road.

www.pilgrims-way.net

JACK BADCOCK

STYLE…(FOLK)

I play guitar and sing, mostly in my band Dallahan, with Ciarán Ryan (banjo, fiddle and mandolin), Jani Lang (fiddle and vocals), and Andrew Waite (accordion). We formed in 2013 through Edinburgh's Irish music sessions, and play music rooted in tradition but exploring jazz, pop, classical, funk and Balkan music. Our new album *Matter of Time* is out in mid-March. All the songs on the album are about love, death, or both, so the title seemed appropriately comprehensive. We definitely feel it's a progression from our previous work. We were testing the water with the first album and weren't sure what we were aiming for. This time round we know what the band's supposed to sound like and we've taken that sound a bit further. The opening track, 'Logan', is my favourite – it's got banging Irish reels, a song and outrageous funk rhythms in it. My regular guitar is a spruce and redwood Lowden O32 jumbo which has got a beautiful rich tone and big bottom end. It has a built-in LR Baggs Anthem pickup which I send through an LR Baggs Para Acoustic DI. I play with a pick and use DADGAD exclusively. At school I was taught standard tuning guitar to a basic level, but didn't really pick up the instrument properly until I discovered folk music and taught myself DADGAD. Heroes and influences? John Doyle, Paul Brady, Kris Drever. I'm not a lyricist, but I often take traditional songs and rewrite the music. At any time, I have a few song ideas that are waiting for the right words to pop up. Future plans? Dallahan are currently touring in Germany, then heading straight on to Nepal for the British/Nepalese bicentenary celebrations at the end of March. After that we've got a UK album launch tour including Edinburgh, Glasgow and London, followed by some summer festivals – Stonehaven Folk Festival, Priddy Folk Festival, Sark Folk Festival and Dumfries and Galloway Arts Festival – and a US tour.

www.dallahanmusic.com

JAMES J TURNER

STYLE…(FOLK-ROCK)

I'm an acoustic protest-Pagan singer-songwriter and Bardic Druid. Based in Liverpool, my music is in the acoustic folk-rock genre. My songs focus on the human struggle, the complexity of spiritual landscapes, and concern for the environment. Due in April, my third solo album, *Spirit, Soul And A Handful Of Mud*, is a comment on the human condition. I love all the songs, but the title track is probably my favourite. It's the tough road of just being alive and how people deal with it that inspires my songwriting, and I wrote this because two great friends of mine had recently passed away. My two regular guitars – and my favourites – are a Martin D-28 and a Martin D-18. I've had them for 15 years, and I've done a lot of work with them – they're old friends. They're both dreadnoughts with spruce tops. The D-28 has a rosewood back and sides so gives me a rounder, more mellow sound. The D-18 is slightly sharper because it has a mahogany back and sides. I use the D-28 in double dropped D and the D-18 in DADGAD. Both instruments are fitted with Fishman Rare Earth pickups. When I'm playing live I usually DI straight into the PA with a Radial DI box; sometimes I use a Fishman Aura preamp. In the studio I always use microphones, usually a stereo pair – one aimed at the bridge, and one aimed at the 12th fret – which I've found is the best way to capture how the guitar really sounds. I play both pick and fingerstyle, usually in combination. For live work I use a Dunlop Max-Grip 1.0. They don't slip out of your fingers when things get hot. I've got gigs and live radio sessions all over the UK in the spring and early summer 2016 to promote the new album, so I'm currently rehearsing for that. I'm also writing new songs for my next album and will be popping into the studio to start recording them.

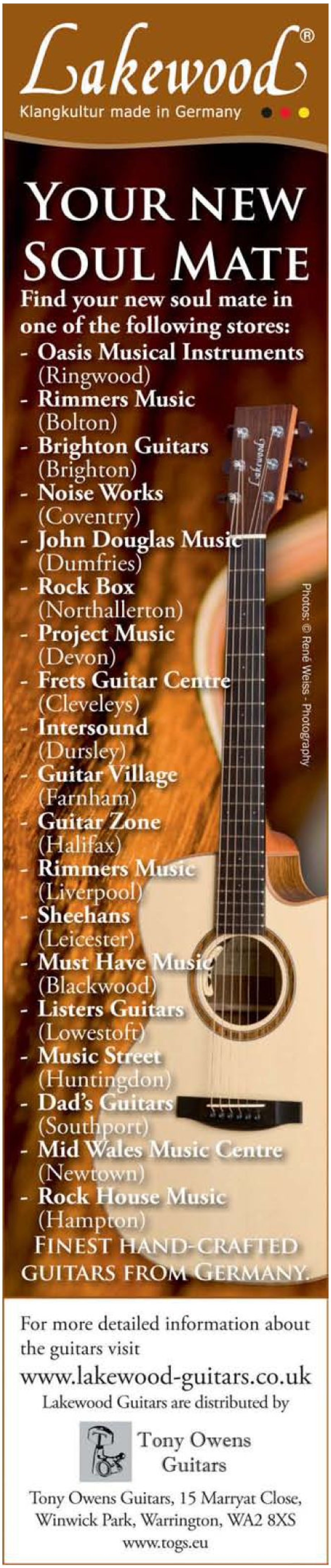
www.jamesjturner.com

ZAID AL-RIKABI

STYLE…(ROOTS/WORLD/GYPSY)

I'm the guitarist in a project called The People's String Foundation, co-writing the music with violinist and singer Ben Sutcliffe. Ben and I started writing music together about 10 years ago in Bath. Our music is genuinely hard to pigeonhole – we actively try and cross genres as much as we can. The songs generally focus on a narrative, so I'd say it's like roots and world influences meeting a gypsy orchestra. We recorded our first album in Cornwall in 2008/9 and recruited our band there. We went through a few different early phases and ended up with drummer Harry Harding, bassist Chris Jones, second violinist Clare Tomlinson, bassoonist Beth Al-Rikabi and Naomi Holmes on keyboards and sax. Our performance line-ups range from duo to 24-piece mini-orchestra. Having that to play with adds energy and scope to our sound. Stories are what inspire my songwriting – our 2014 album, *The Lost Dreams Of Gilgamesh*, was based on the ancient Sumerian story 'The Epic Of Gilgamesh'. All the composing I do starts on acoustic guitar. After getting a mood going, I'll let that sit and then a melody might spring into my head, get stuck and eventually be transposed out. My regular guitar is a solid mahogany Martin 000-15 steel-strung acoustic. I've played Fenders, Martins, Gibsons and the like, but always seem to settle with my Martin. It's built for a working musician, with warm tones and a bright high end that rarely struggles, whatever I put it through. I often play it through my pedal board straight into a DI. I run a simple live set-up: a Strymon El Capistan tape delay and a modified Boss TR-2 tremolo pedal. Upcoming gigs include The Chapel Arts, Bath on 15 April and Lusty Glaze Woodburner Sessions, Newquay on 27 April. I'm also planning a new PSF EP, hopefully for September.

www.thepeoplesstringfoundation.com

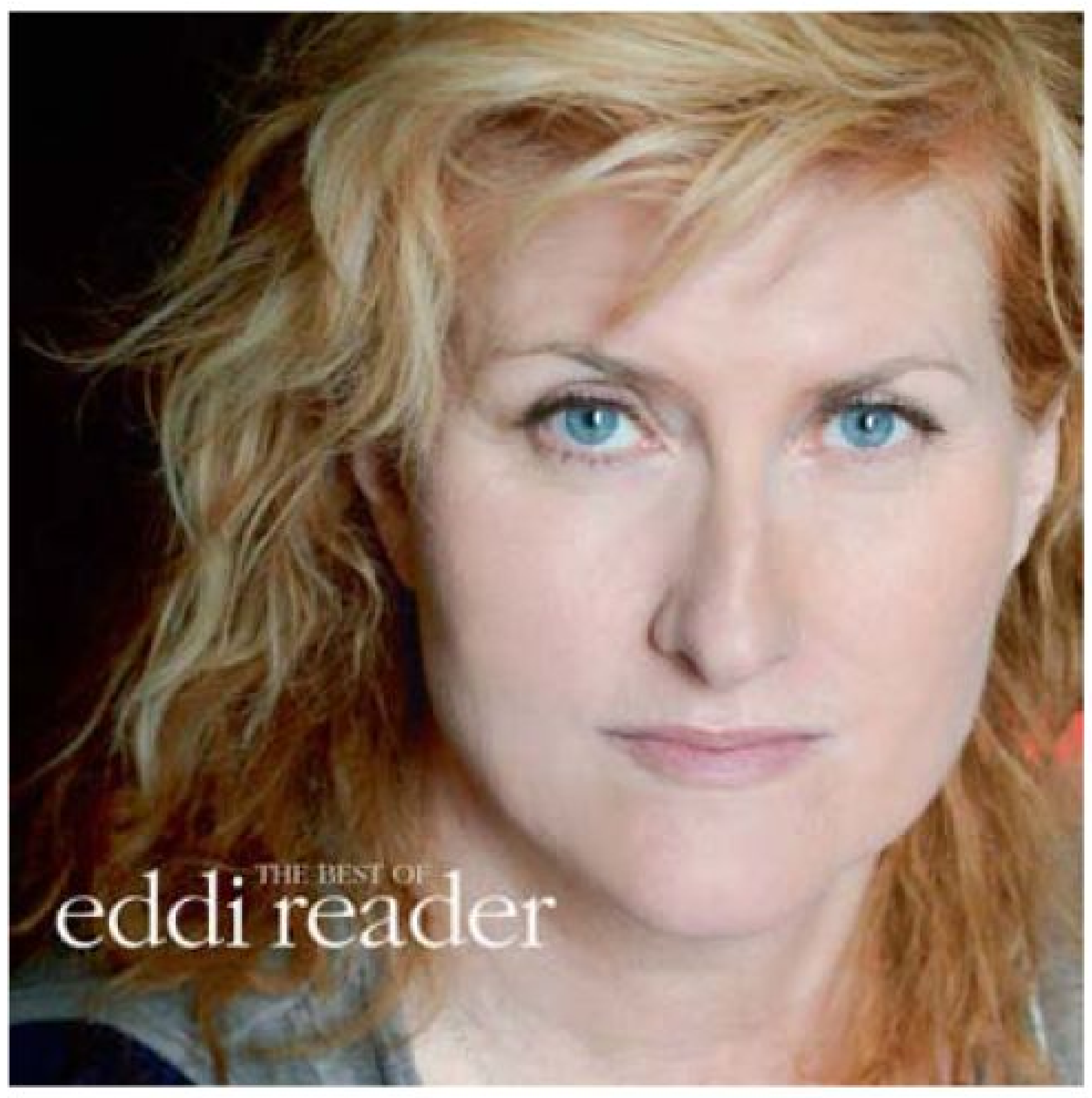


THE BLACK FEATHERS

SOAKED TO THE BONE

WWW.THEBLACKFEATHERS.COM

Sian Chandler and Ray Hughes spawned the Black Feathers in deepest Gloucestershire, but upon casual hearing most listeners might deduce they were hearing something recorded south of the Mason-Dixon line. Key to their sound is their glorious blending of big sky country harmonies, which etched against Ray Hughes' guitar, dashes of cello and some minimal percussion, create an album that engages from start to finish. For the most part it's upbeat country-tinged stuff, and although songs like the doomy 'Blind' call the changes, it's the prevailing good time feel that still carries the day. **JP**

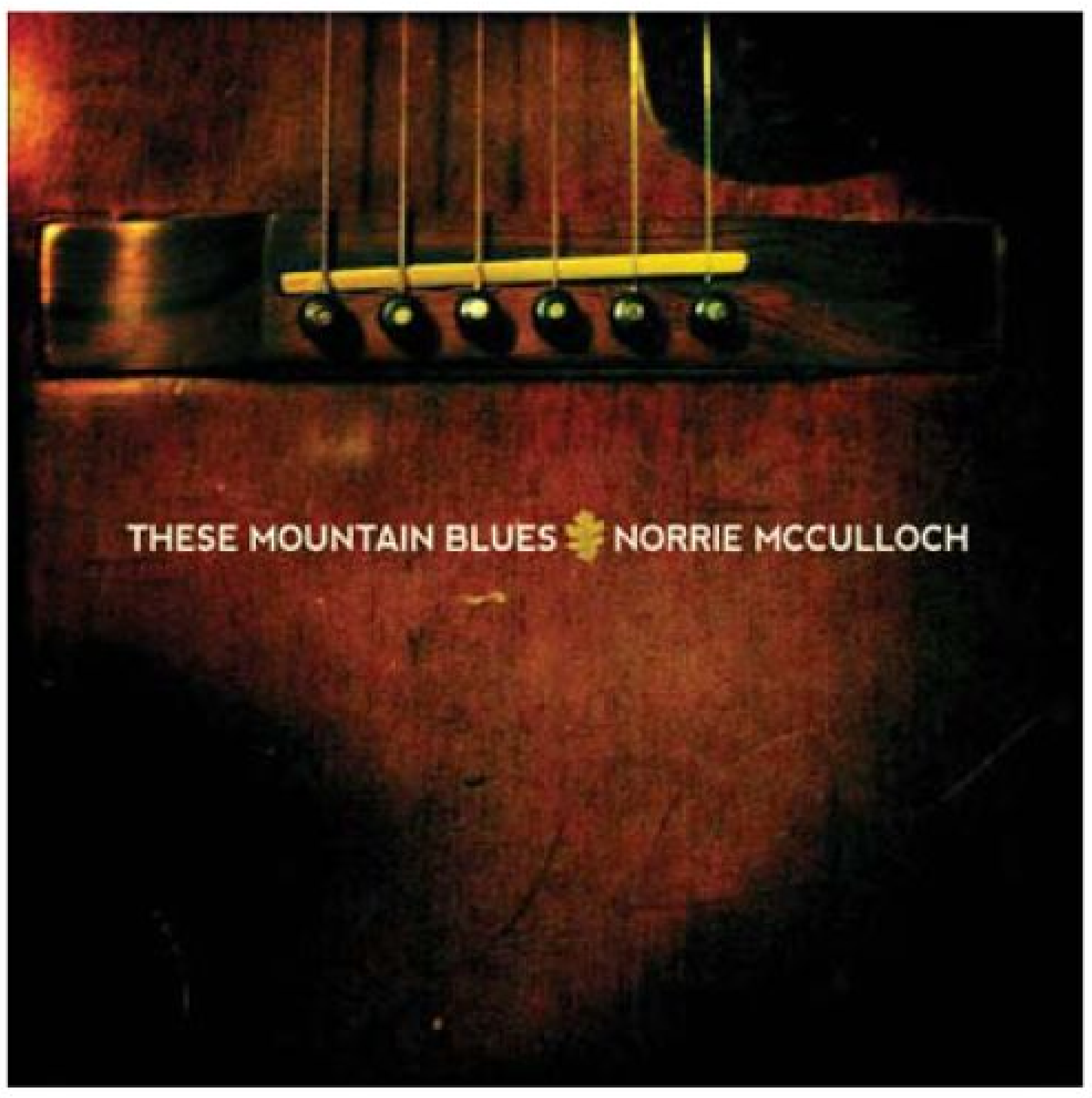


EDDI READER

THE BEST OF EDDI READER

WWW.EDDIREADER.CO.UK

Incredibly, Eddi Reader's been out there for over 30 years, and so this 30-song career retrospective is cutely apposite. It's easy to understand why her gentle invocations on 'Patience Of Angels' secured her a chart hit, but she's possessed of a voice that floats like honey over everything she tackles, from Steve Earle's 'My Old Friend The Blues' to her glory days in Fairground Attraction, well represented with 'Find My Love' and 'Perfect'. It must have been difficult for her to pick out just 30 songs, but on this showing quite why she's often slipped through the cracks of public recognition is a mystery. **JP**



NORRIE MCCULLOCH

THESE MOUNTAIN BLUES

WWW.NORRIEMCCULLOCH.COM

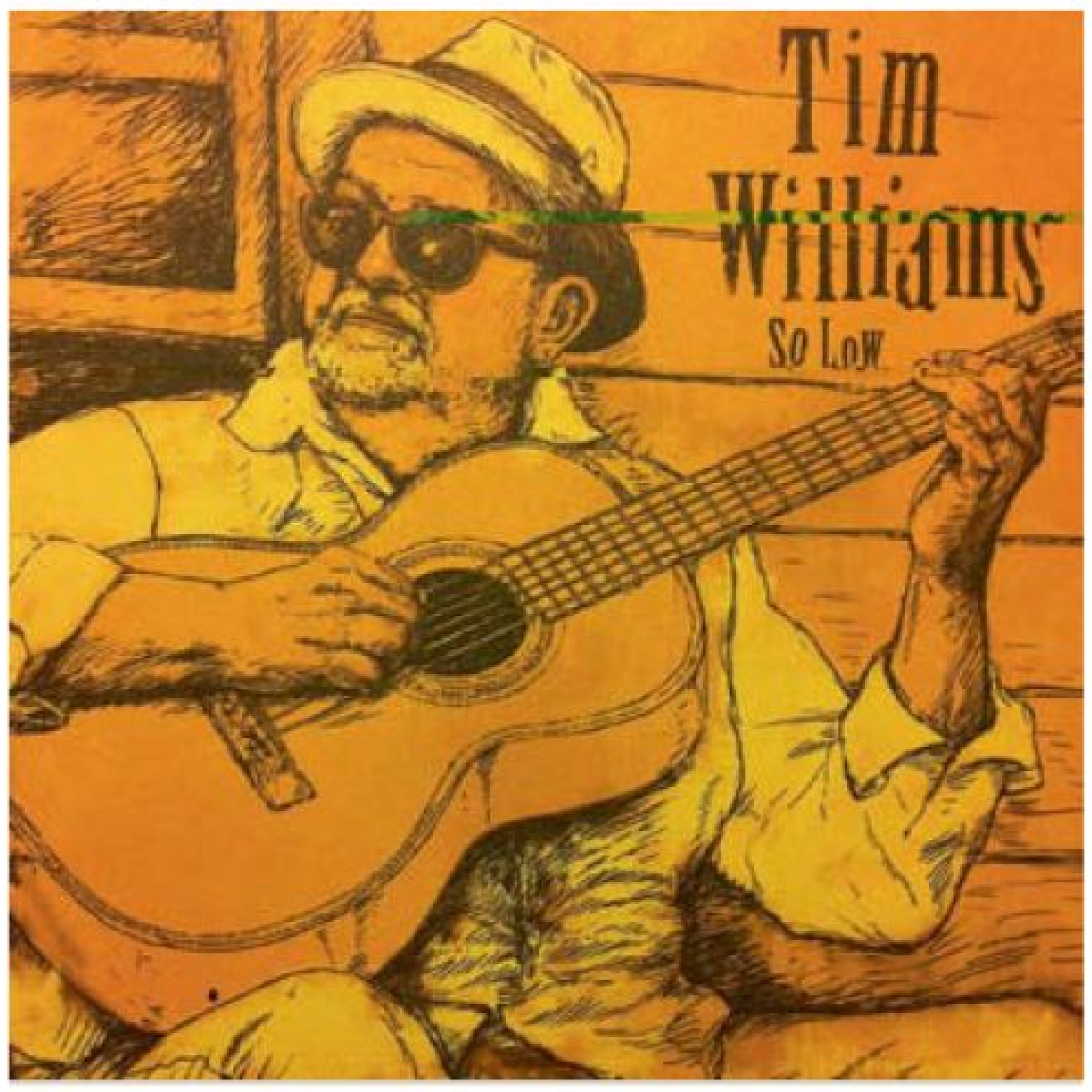
Recorded direct to analogue tape – always a good start – on his second album Scottish singer/songwriter Norrie McCulloch mines what, for him, is clearly the rich heritage of Americana music. Apparently inspired by a pilgrimage to the grave of Townes Van Zandt, wisely while the generic feel – whining pedal steel on 'New Joke' and Norrie's wheezing harmonica – point fairly and squarely to Nashville, the subject material of his songs sticks to the universal. Sure the spirit of Neil Young stalks the proceedings, but that's no bad thing, the overall effect shifting him into the same time-ruffled league as the artists he clearly admires. **JP**

MATT ANDERSEN

HONEST MAN

WWW.STUBBYFINGERS.CA

Maybe there's a time in every bluesman's career when the lure of obscurity ceases to pay for the grits and groceries? Canadian singer Matt Andersen's a case in point. When he first blew into town he nailed his colours firmly to the blues mast, but now a few albums in, he's suddenly gone all funky. Not that it doesn't work. On songs like the loping title track, a kind of sub-Stax workout with stabbing horns and metronomic drumming, Matt's fine soulful voice is able to go to town. And there's a lot to like here, 'Let's Get Back' with its echoes of Greg Allman and the soft country charm of 'Quiet Company' make this, as Matt says, a watershed album. **JP**

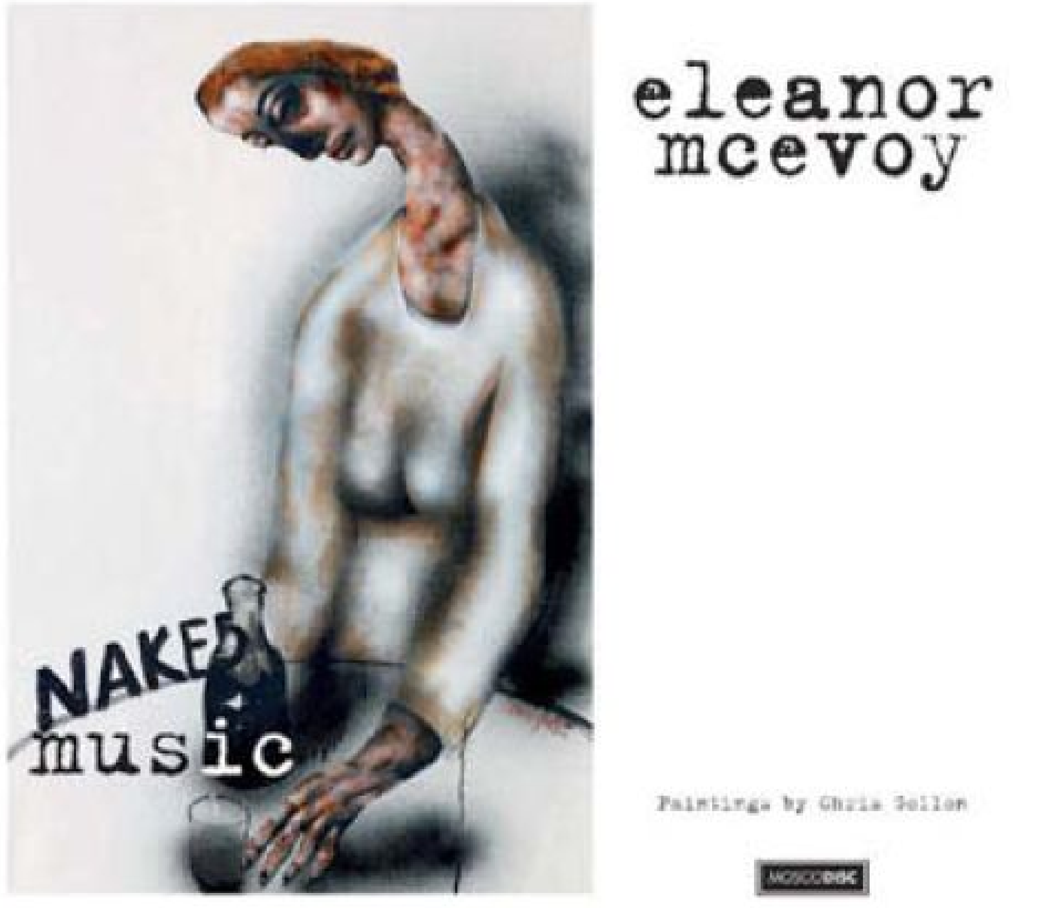


TIM WILLIAMS
SO LOW
WWW.CAYUSEMUSIC.COM

Whatever your opinion of the state of modern blues music, you can rest assured that, here at least, it's in capable hands. Tim Williams is an accomplished troubadour from Alberta, Canada, who's sat down in a studio with a bunch of vintage instruments, and got it down just like they used to. No messing. And with songs like Mose Allison's 'If You Live' and Blind Boy Fuller's 'Pistol Snapping Blues', mixed up with five originals the pace never slacks. Tim's Harmony Sovereign 12-string rings out like thunder on his song 'The Grizzly Bear', and Johnny Cash's 'Big River' is turned into a glorious slide workout. **JP**

RICHARD DURRANT
THE GIRL AT THE AIRPORT
WWW.RICHARD-DURRANT.COM

Recorded in Prague with the city's Philharmonic Orchestra, composer and concert guitarist Richard Durrant winds up his four-and-a-half year project to record a trilogy of albums celebrating the music of Paraguay. That lands him squarely in a field of one, but a pretty impressive field it is. Durrant's rich, lyrical nylon-strung acoustic rings out over 11 tracks of which the haunting title track, with the orchestra's empathetic support – they appeared tied at the musical hip – and 'Vuelo de Luciemogas', with its clattering ukulele, are standouts. It's all stunning stuff and, of course, all very Paraguayan. **JP**



ELEANOR MCEVOY
NAKED MUSIC
WWW.ELEANORMCEVOY.COM

For her new album, Eleanor McEvoy hunkered down in a studio with just her guitar and a clutch of fine songs. And, as the album's title suggests, it's an intimate listening experience – it can feel as if Eleanor's perched just across the room. She's an impassioned singer, and her voice really comes into its own on 'Deliver', a song which begins with her breathy invocation over some funky guitar, and the winsome but vulnerable 'Whisper A Prayer To The Moon.' There seems to be nothing the girl can't try her hand at, from the country-tinged 'Lubbock Woman' to 'The Thought Of You', which she admits is an attempt to write a soul opus worthy of Al Green. **JP**

BLAIR DUNLOP
GILDED
WWW.BLAIRDUNLOP.COM

"Piece by piece we lose control, you sell your soul," warns Blair Dunlop on 'First World Problem', very much an anthem for our time. Blair's a gifted guitarist keenly aware that less is often more. He's happy to strum the chords behind 'Castello', but on 'Temper Your Smiling' his percussive modal playing recalls the intricacy of Nic Jones. The album happily drifts through understated arrangements, with gorgeous swelling Hammond drones, and cleverly constructed narratives. There're no shortage of second generation folk singers out there, but with his Albion Band background – plus his pa is Ashley Hutchings – inevitably Blair is head and shoulders above many. A rare brilliance lurks. **JP**

SIERRA HULL
WEIGHTED MIND
WWW.SIERRAHULL.COM

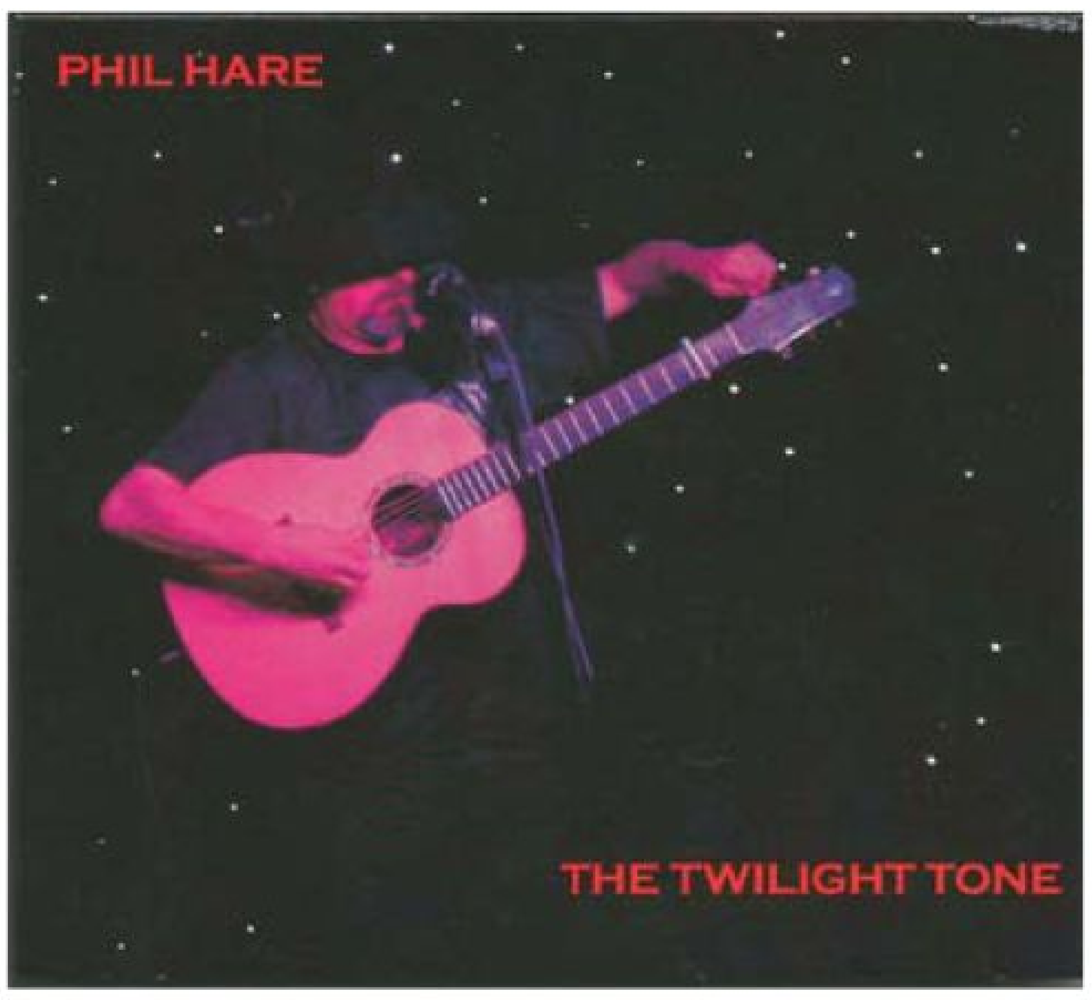
A teenage mandolin virtuoso and a bluegrass 'prodigy', Sierra Hull was taken under Alison Krauss's wing, and five years on we now find the girl chasing solo success. Accompanied by double bass with guest appearances from some heavyweight peers – Abigail Washburn, Bela Fleck, Rhiannon Giddens and Ms Krauss – Sierra knows she doesn't have to prove she's nifty on the mandolin; a widdle fest this is not. In fact bluegrass this is not. Favouring understated stark arrangements, her slow contemplative songs take the listener on an intriguing genre-defying ride. "I'm tired of spinning around, I'll just step out," she sings on 'Compass', and many people that catch this album will be glad she did. **JP**

JON HART
REBORN
WWW.JONHARTMUSIC.COM

It's not often that the latent energy in a CD threatens to implode, but when Jon Hart powers into 'Sticks & Stones', a pumped up workout of tapping and percussive chords, it's a distinct possibility. Largely solo but with suitably atmospheric backing from Chris Woods on 'Red Room', a liaison that works really well, this is a blast from start to finish. Jon's long harmonic introduction on 'Waves' recalls Preston Reed, and his live take of 'Father' proves this isn't all done by mirrors. Standout performances dripping with atmosphere. **JP**

THE GLOAMING
THE GLOAMING 2
WWW.THEGLOAMING.NET

The second album from this trans-Atlantic liaison between Irish fiddlers Martin Hayes and Caoimhín Ó Raghallaigh, New York pianist Thomas Bartlett and Chicago's Dennis Cahill, finds them once again pushing the sonic boundaries of Irish traditional music. Working with singer Iarla Ó Lionaírd, 'The Pilgrim's Song' finds them producing the kind of stunning ethereal backdrop that has become their trademark. Other worldly with an airy almost ambient feel, it's difficult to think of any Irish musicians who so splendidly conjure a cinematic vision of the Emerald Isle with their music. **JP**

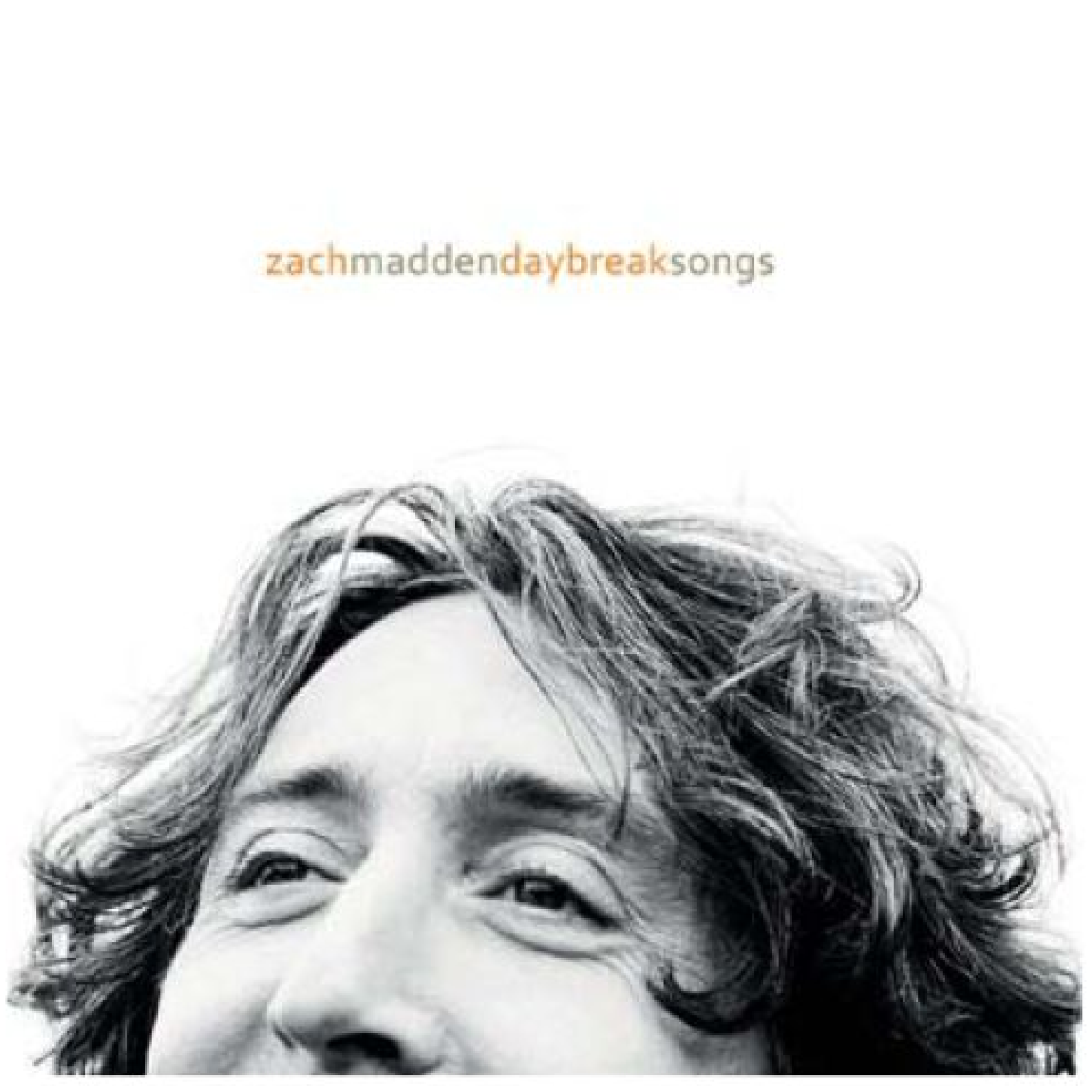


PHIL HARE
THE TWILIGHT TONE
WWW.PHILHARE.CO.UK

Phil Hare admits to being under the spell of Bert Jansch and Davey Graham, and it shows. There's plenty of epic guitar work on display, and whatever he tackles he just gets it right. In the wrong hands, the wide range of material on offer might not work, but the gorgeous deep tone of his Gary Nava 'Signature' guitar, is a joy to hear. Keane's song 'Somewhere Only We Know', gets a sensitive instrumental reading, there's a finger busting snippet of jazz pianist Horace Silver's 'The Preacher', and Phil gets downright political with 'The Day Thatcher Passed Away', a bitter elegy with a sting in the tail. An album that will delight all lovers of fine guitar. **JP**

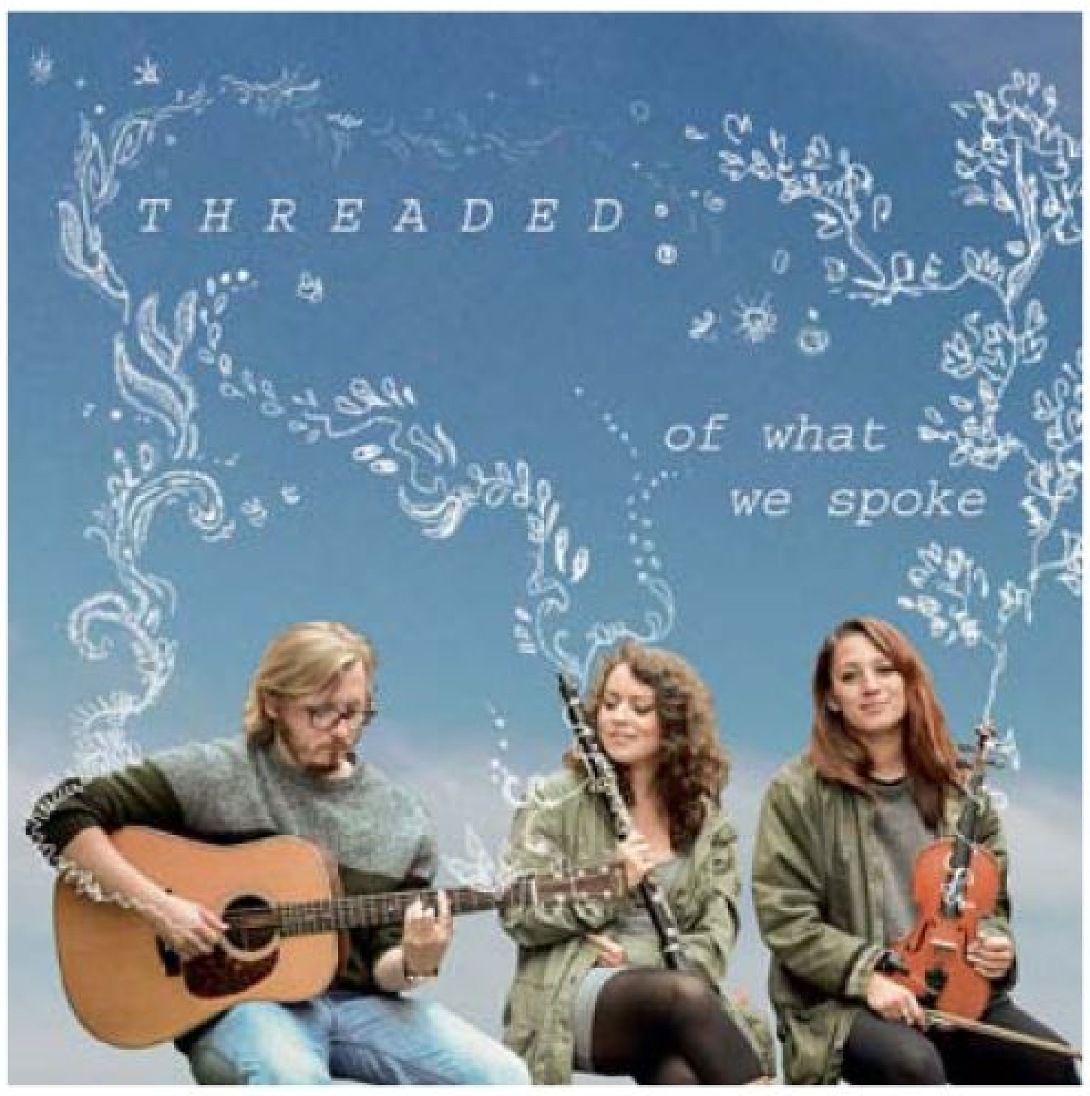
CORINNE WEST
STARLIGHT HIGHWAY
WWW.CORINNEWEST.COM

California: from the opening bars of Ms West's album, visions of the high sierras, canyons and endless vistas crowd into the consciousness. Blessed with one of those gentle, slightly wavery voices that sound on the edge of tears, she floats over a lightly strummed guitar and distant organ, as she sings 'Trouble No More.' The songs rarely get out of second gear, but with Kelly Joe Phelps adding guitar, the end result is certainly classy. Highlights include the country sounding 'Cry Of The Echo Drifter', and the stomping title track, a showcase for Mike Marshall's frenetic mandolin breakouts. But just a little bit of grit wouldn't go amiss. **JP**



ZACH MADDEN
DAYBREAK SONGS
WWW.ZACHMADDEN.COM

The runaway success of Ed Sheeran in the States must have been a beacon of hope for singers like Zach Madden. Not that he's not off to a bad start. Based in the surfing paradise that is Santa Barbara, CA, his gentle songs and light acoustic guitar slot into that genre that Jack Johnson exploited so effortlessly. That said, Zach's ahead of the pack. There's a breathless hypnotic quality to many of his songs like 'You And Me And Her', confessional intimate moments that segue into one another, and leave you wondering just what he's going to tell us next. It's all very sweet – and presumably all very honest. **JP**

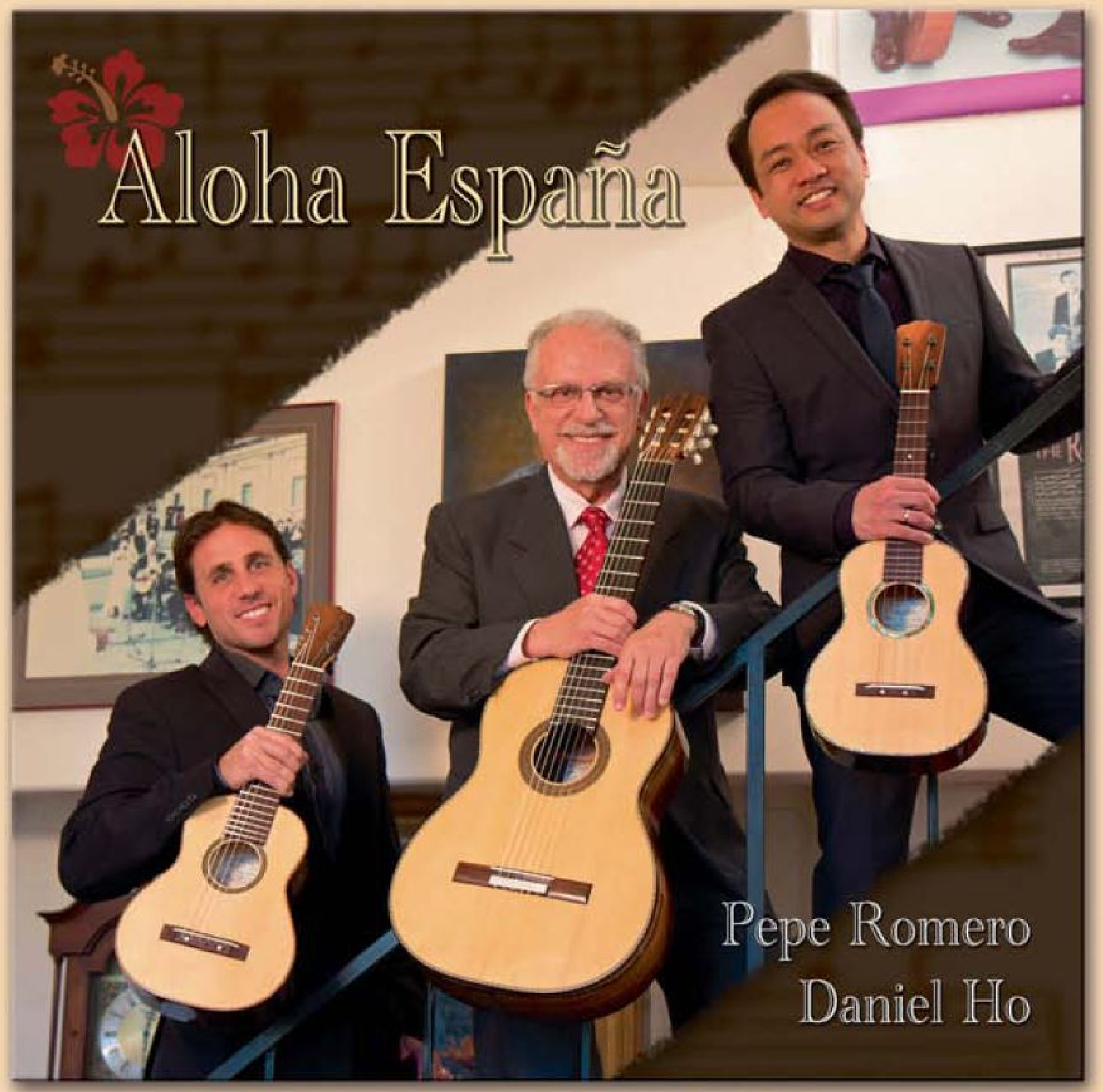


THREADED
OF WHAT WE SPOKE
WWW.THREADEDMUSIC.COM

As unusual lineups go, Threaded are off to a good start; guitar, clarinet and violin are not obvious bedfellows. Violinist Ning-ning Li is classical trained, and as result when they strut something like the rollicking 'Captain Markham', it comes over as more a piece of neo classical improvisation than a folky jig. Clearly inspiration is not a problem; Robert Browning's poem 'The Pied Piper Of Hamelin' morphs into 'A Secret Charm', with the Potawatomi tribe of North America being the basis of 'Dreamfire', a song complete with suitable chanting. Where it's all going is anyone's guess, but as we know, that often makes for the finest music. **JP**

MATT WOOSEY
DESIDERATA
WWW.MATTWOOSEY.CO.UK

West Country singer Matt Woosey rings the changes with this latest release; and many changes there are. Gone are the obvious blues workouts, replaced instead by a dazzling variety of stylistic adventures, ranging from the gentle MOR sounds of 'Always Be The One', to the mesmeric classical beauty of 'Mystified'. Divided into two halves, side two begins with a six-minute trip hoppy sonic wave, Matt's vocals mixed far back over a cascading ripple of piano and drums, before it's back to basics: Matt's rhythmic slapped acoustic well in the forefront. Of course there's an instinct to ask 'Will the real Matt Woosey please stand up?' But with this kind of talent on display, ultimately it doesn't matter. **JP**



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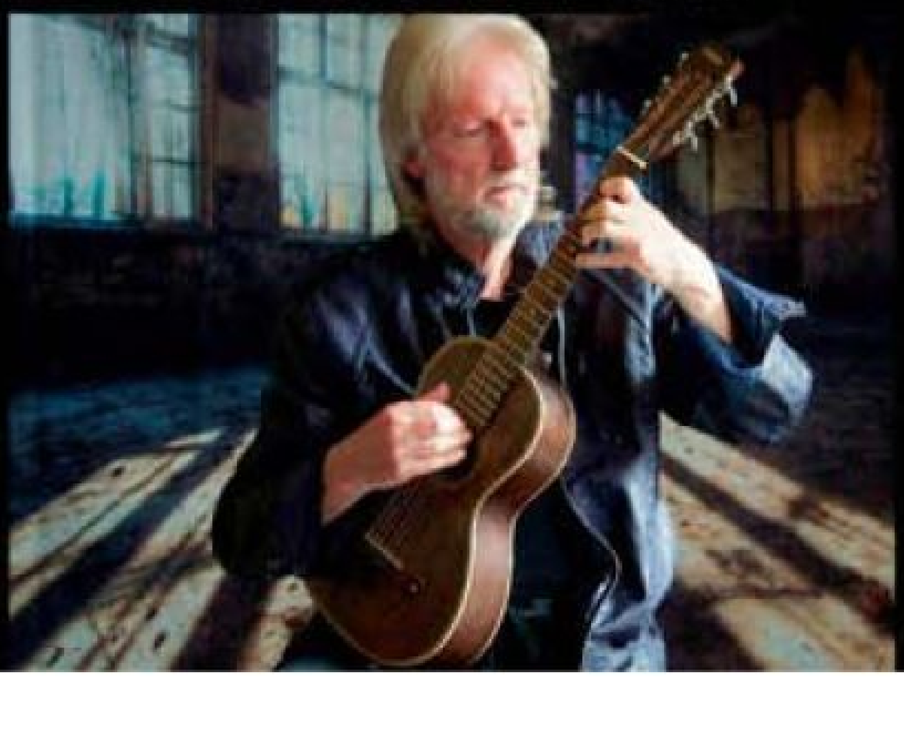

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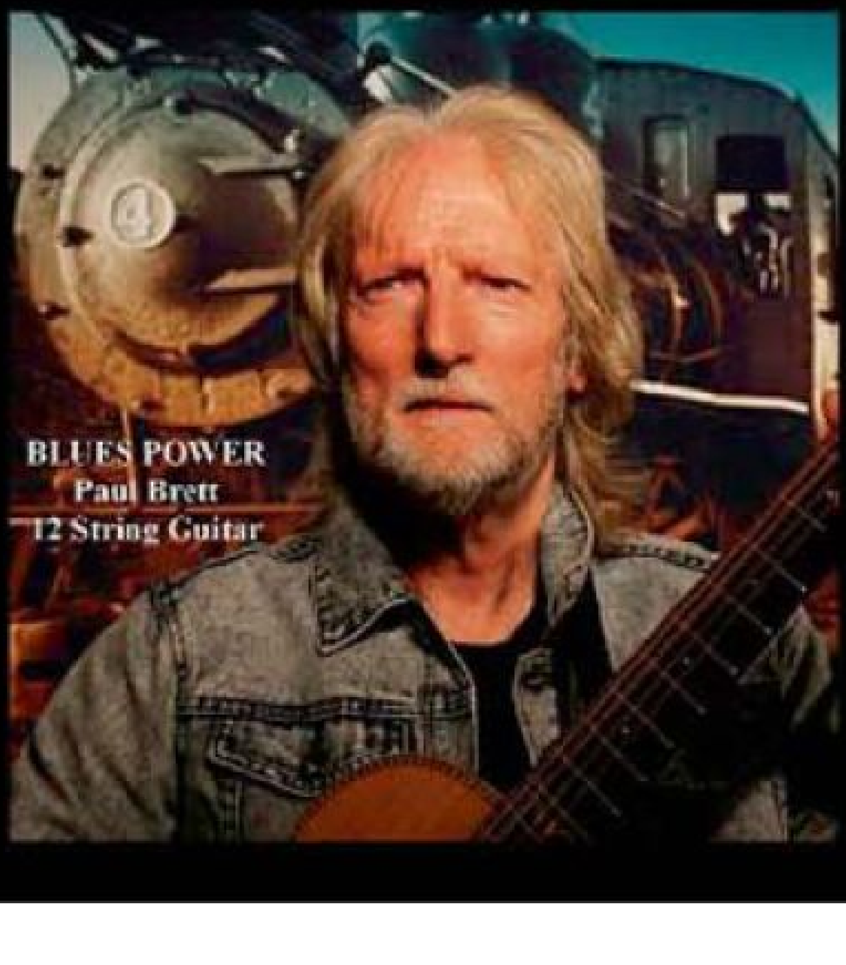

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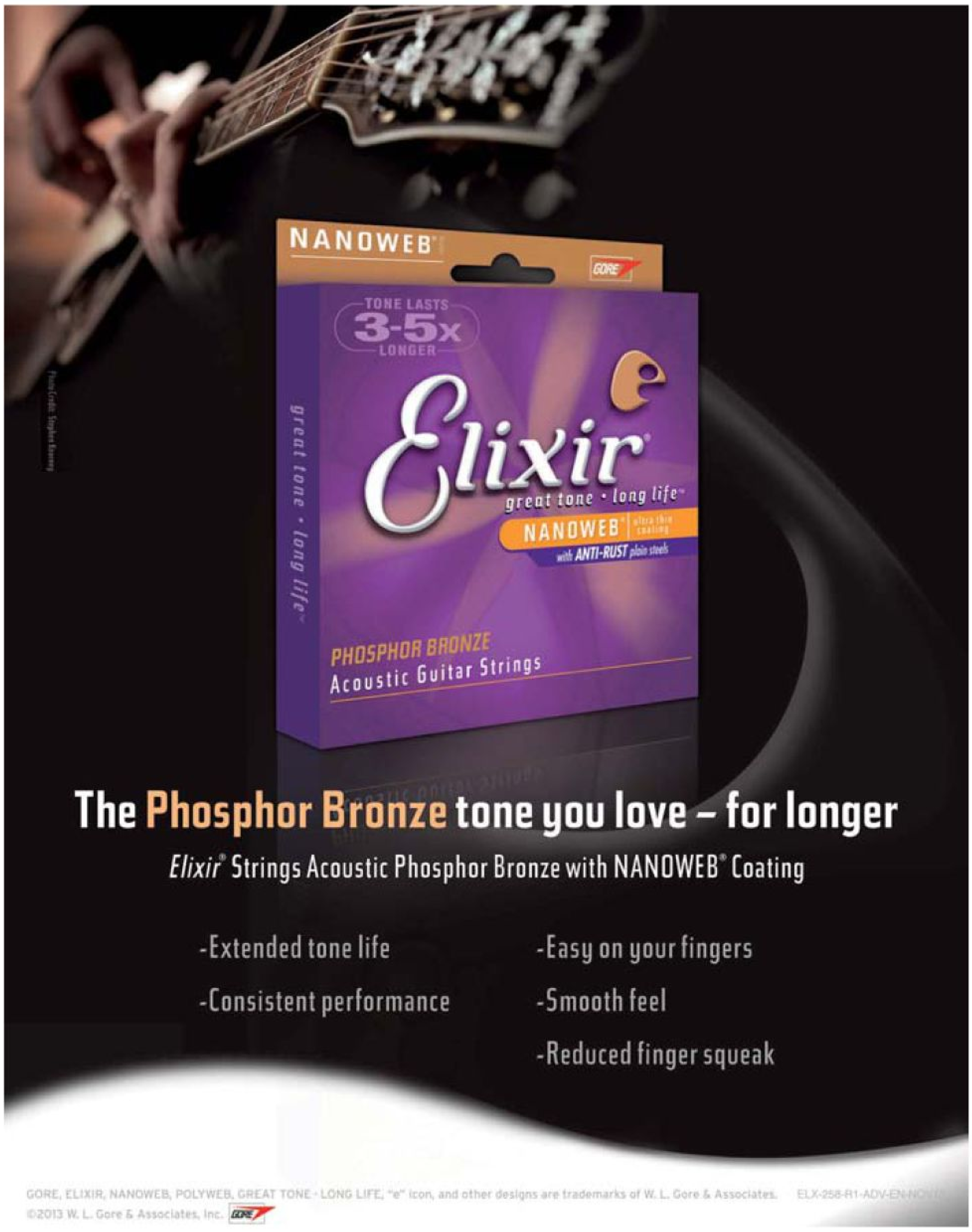

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'BLACKBIRD'

Carl Orr from Rockschool kicks off a new series on songs and songwriting

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: SUITABLE FOR ALL

Welcome to the first of my regular columns where I will share with you my fascination with the song form, and use excerpts from well-known and not so well-known songs as a basis for technical development and simple, practical songwriting study.

There was an explosion of acoustic guitar-based music in the 1960s, from the social criticism of Bob Dylan to the earthy folk-rock of Pentangle, from the urbane sophistication of James Taylor to the melancholy English pastoralism of Nick Drake. The Beatles had their own unique take on acoustic music and 'Blackbird', from *The White Album* (1968) is one of the finest examples.

TECHNIQUE

The playing technique of the first bar is very conventional, with the thumb (p) playing the bass notes while notes on the B and G strings are struck by the second (m) and first fingers respectively. In bars two and three an unorthodox technique of Paul McCartney's is used – a G note on the 10th fret of the A string sustains under open G notes. These are struck by alternating the thumb and second finger. This slightly lopsided, 'homemade' technique resulted in a unique guitar part, and is a good example of how a quirky, personal approach can be used as a solid basis for writing a song.

Many guitarists have used personal quirks as the basis for interesting musical ideas, Django Reinhardt's maimed left hand giving him the incentive to develop seemingly superhuman technique to compensate for it being one example and Jeff Beck's inability to grip a plectrum without dropping it causing him to revert to playing with his bare fingers and thumb being another. Both guitarists produced unique musical results due to these quirks, (e.g. Reinhardt's 'Nuages' and Beck's 'Where Were You?') and 'Blackbird' is another notable example.

The open G-string is played at least twice in every bar of 'Blackbird', and the whole guitar part is comprised of simple phrases moving up and down around the open G string as a 'pedal' point. This effect creates a mesmerising and hypnotic effect which draws the listener in and gives the song a pleasing cohesiveness when moving from one chord to another.

'Blackbird' will take some time to learn, it takes quite a bit of work to master, but it's worth the effort as it's one of those songs every guitarist wants to perfect. However the expression "practice makes perfect" only works if you practise it as close to "perfect" as possible. Do not practise mistakes, as this just reinforces the mistakes until they become ingrained into the performance.

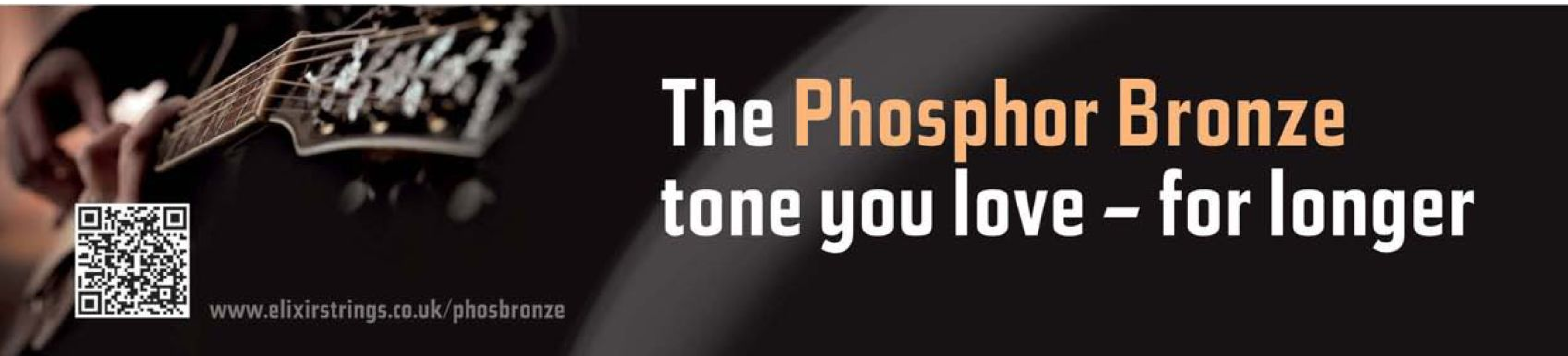
Give every note its full value and let the open G string ring out clearly at all times. Take it slowly at first, playing each bar individually and repeatedly at a tempo that's slow enough for you to play it without mistakes. Gradually work up in tempo.

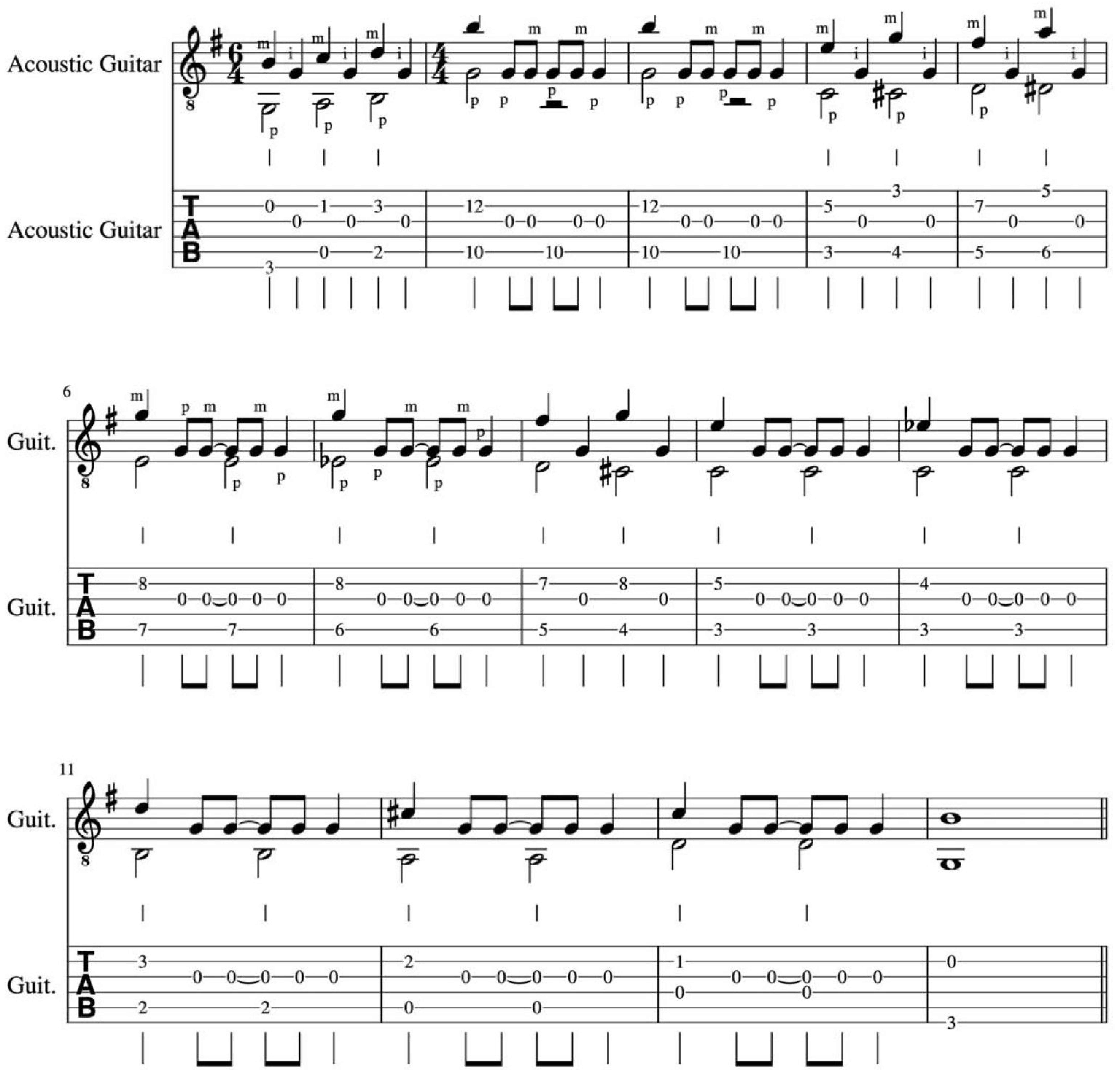
I am a firm believer that, while technical practice of scales, arpeggios and fingering exercises is beneficial, learning as many songs as possible is just as important for developing an expansive technique, as every song presents its own unique set of technical challenges. 'Blackbird' is a prime example of this.

SONGWRITING INSPIRATION

As we can see from this short extract, 'Blackbird' has an unusual and irregular form. It starts with a bar of 6/4 with the chords changing every two beats, followed by two bars of G major in 4/4. In bars four and five, the chords change with chromatically rising bass notes every two beats, then in bars six and seven there is one chord per bar, so the 'harmonic rhythm' (the speed at which the chords change) is extremely irregular. This gives it a natural charm, like a beautiful tree with a twisted, misshapen trunk. In the case of this song, the featured harmonic rhythms are one chord per bar (e.g. bar nine), one chord per two bars (e.g. bars two and three) and one chord per two beats (e.g. bar one).

I have written a variation on these opening bars. I imitated the harmonic rhythm and the fingerpicking technique, but I have used the B string as the pedal point, rather than the G string, and changed the key to E major, resulting in a sound reminiscent of 'Blackbird' but far from a simple copy. I have copied the timing of the chord movements but my choice of chord was based on whatever pleased my ear and was not copied from 'Blackbird'. The end result is a guitar part reminiscent of 'Blackbird', but with a distinct character of its own. As with every Beatles song, there are a couple of music





lessons to be learned. The first one is that using a pedal tone throughout gives the guitar part a sense of cohesion. The second is that variations in harmonic rhythm add a great deal of interest to a song's texture.

I have used this method of copying the approach of a song written by someone else many times, rather than imitating the actual notes and chords of the original. When we do this we learn useful compositional techniques, which we can then permutate in our own way to create something distinctly different from the original inspiration. I hope you have enjoyed this brief exploration of 'Blackbird' – see you next time for more. ■

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RICHARD GILEWITZ FINGERSTYLE GUITARIST

'THUMBSING' – A LOTTO STACCATO

FULL TAB ONLINE

Richard Gilewitz on how he overcame his fear of the plectrum

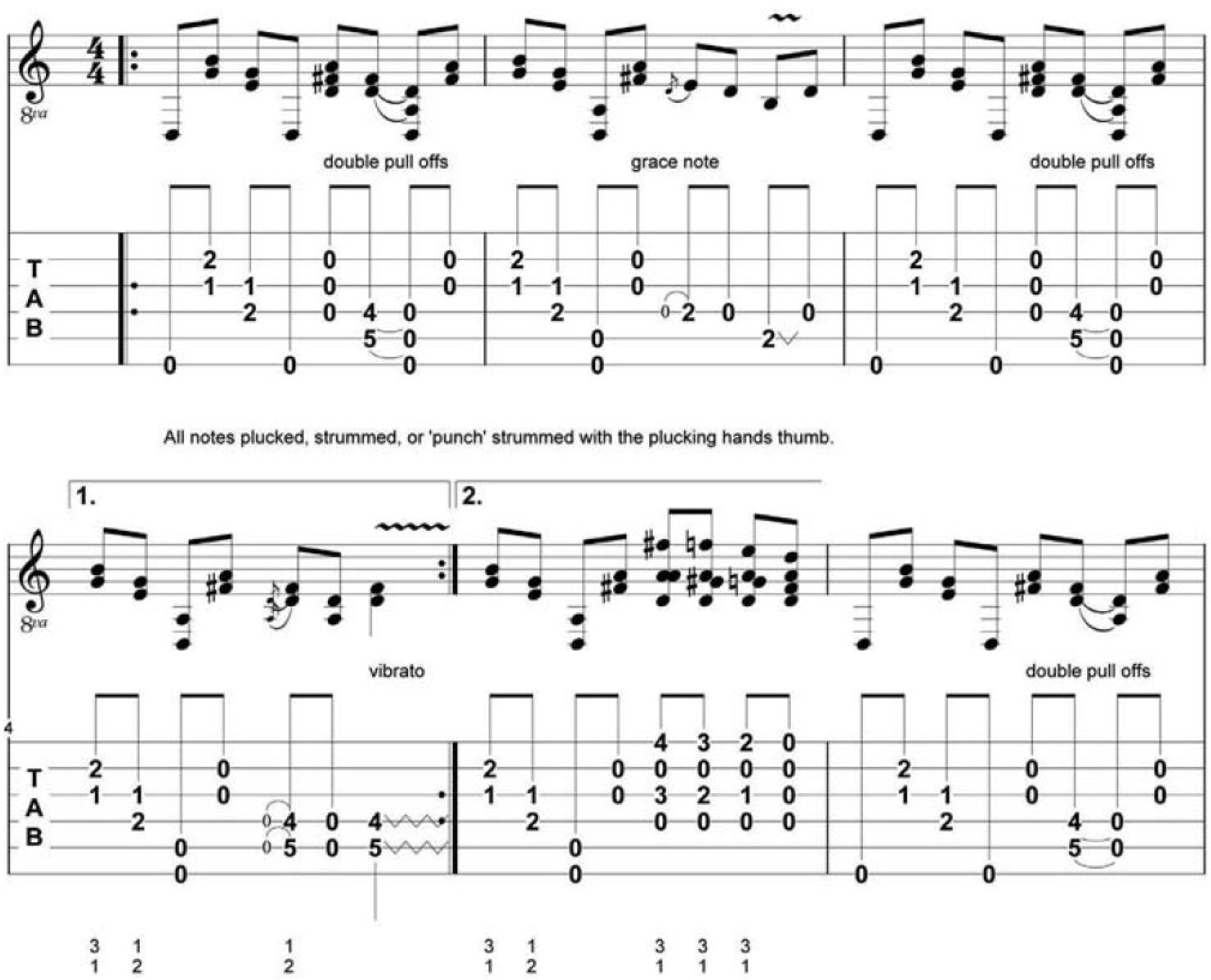
TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: SUITABLE FOR ALL

I had a memorable nightmare several years ago involving a situation that I realised was a reality when I woke up the next morning. I had been playing guitar for well over 30 years but in the dream I found myself on stage attempting to perform while simply strumming a guitar with a plectrum. I couldn't do it.

I still have no idea why but I've just never used one. Every time I've tried, the pick just goes flying away or simply falls in the hole. I spend more time shaking the thing out of the hole than actually using it. If I'm lucky enough to pull off a few effective strums, the sound is akin to a brick being dragged harshly across barbed wire strings. Welcome to the wonderful world of the fingerpicker.

Not one to be outdone, I finally surmised that I was not only up for the challenge once again but I had actually found a viable solution: strum with my thumb. For starters, it was attached to my hand and therefore altogether less likely to fly away or fall in the hole.

'THUMBSING' – RICHARD GILEWITZ



Throwing my six-string guitar into an Open D tuning (low to high – DADF#AD), I searched around the neck with my left fretting hand fingers and went on an exploration while strumming downwards with my right thumb. Out of a fear of going up with my thumb I thought I had better just stick with down for a while.

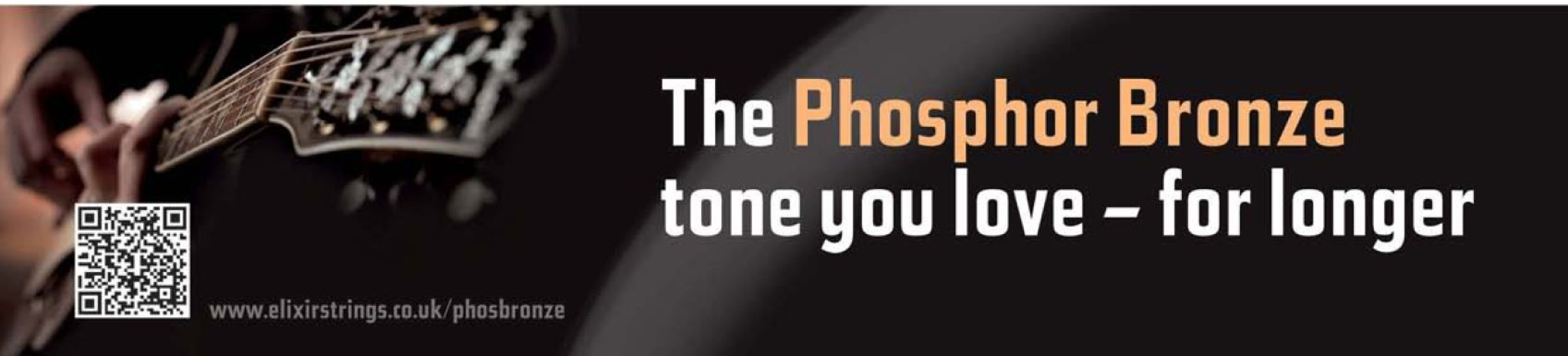
Before I knew it, several hours if not a few days later, I felt I was on to something. My left hand was free to explore grace notes, single and double hammer-ons and pull-offs, vibratos, mute and staccato stops, chromatic descents, bar chords, and slides without any right hand picking finger intrusions.

Once that reservoir was tapped I looked again at how my right thumb would not feel too lonely and left out of the game. I had been teaching regional strumming for quite some time showing students how to target groups of strings and adding dynamic attacks for definition while strumming. I enjoyed watching them do this and eventually I was able to simulate the effect with the grouping of my three right hand fingers – index, middle and ring.

For example, when playing a G major chord I would have them attempt to be conscious of choosing to strike strings six, five and four, or four through one and sometimes go for the middle range of five through two in an attempt to avoid strings six and one.

As it turns out, although there is quite a bit of action going on with my left hand in this original tune, 'Thumbsing', it's really my right hand thumb that's the hero of the tune – and everyone likes a hero.

The following are some study notes to accompany this short fragment of



the complete piece which I recorded on *Thumbsing* as the opening and featured track and then once again on *Live at 2nd Street Theatre*, where I very subtly use a delay pedal to enhance bounce and ride for the tune.

Before you attempt the tune, do consider some of these ideas as a general way to create new sounds on your instrument. And yes, it might be possible to pull this off using a plectrum. Somehow though, I feel there is something about that human contact of flesh on strings that play a huge role in the general spirit of the music.

Suggested fretting fingers are listed although feel free to approach this piece any way you like. I am simply listing the way my hands feel most comfortable to effectively create some of the dynamic hammer-ons, pull-offs and vibratos.

Another huge consideration is to avoid playing with an even volume with the striking thumb. The definition of power in the attack should vary on a one to 10 scale from about three to nine depending on your own emotions during the performance.

I would also spend a large amount of time being specific to what you see in the piece here – it's tempting to simply approximate and play something "like" this. I encourage that approach later, but for now try to stick with what is written.

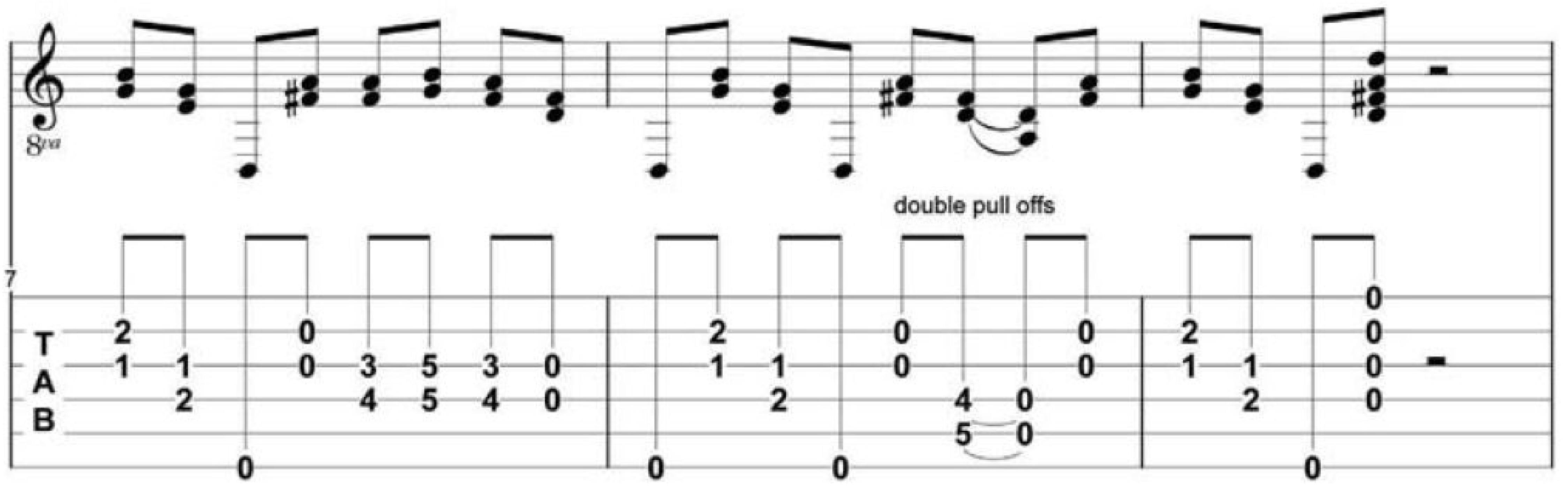
Bar 1 – Keep it simple and avoid any dynamics, but be sure to create a "balanced" double pull-off. Also, when you do pull off, realise that you need to hit string six on the pull off or beat four.

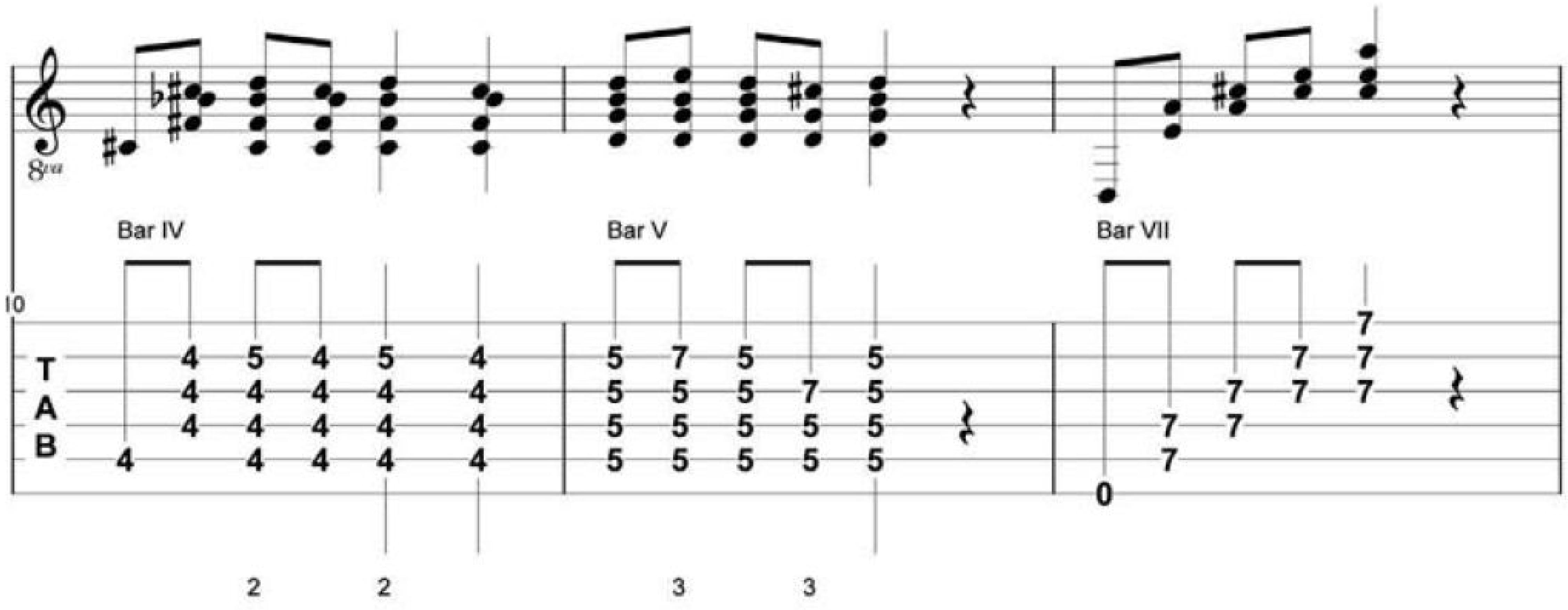
Bar 2 – Beat three is a grace note and could be your first slight dynamic with a bit of extra power. Beat four introduces a very subtle vibrato. Keep these effects light so they can be enhanced later during similar moves.

Bar 4 – Beat four is the first double vibrato and should be accentuated as a bit of a wakeup call to the tune as it comes to life.

Bar 5 – Beats three and four involve a strong chromatic two-finger descent and should be your first very strong strikes to finally bring the tune to life.

Bar 7 – Beats three and four offer a bit of a challenge since you want your thumb to only strike strings four and three accurately and four times in a row with a bit of fretting finger movement. This might prove to be more challenging than you think as you will see the real need for accuracy in avoiding the surrounding strings.





Bar 9 – The 'and' of beat two should be your most aggressive strike thus far creating almost a rake type effect with a sudden stop since you will need two beats of silence as you enter the next phase of the tune.

Bar 10 – Begin with a somewhat softer approach in order to demonstrate contrast from the last place you left, and be sure to pay close attention to adding the second finger on string two, fret five as needed in front of your bar at fret four. You might consider even offering a very subtle vibrato on those fives.

Bar 11 – This is the same as the last bar but bring your volume level up one notch and consider putting in a bit of a crescendo. Take special note that the third finger in front of the bar navigates from string 2 to 3. Once again on beat three, follow up with an abrupt stop. You might even treat that beat as an eighth note with an extra eighth note rest. Be sure to avoid string one since you want to save that for the next bar when you bar fret seven.

Bar 12 – See if you can effectively navigate the thumb after the initial strike on string six exactly as you see it here in the music – in ascending pairs until the last stronger strike including string one.

Bar 14 – The 'and' of beat two requires a quick grace note slide from fret seven to nine. Once you have arrived at nine, feel free to remove the finger instead of sustaining the note. It can be a nice effect to have the note simply 'disappear' in this way. I like to play the 'and' of beat three with my second finger and accentuated vibrato following a very strong thumb strike. The tune is now alive.

My last recommendation is that you consider developing this technique over time and with a metronome at a slow and steadily increasing tempo.

See how much you can dig out of the approach using your own feel for the dynamics, without, of course, forcing them.

I also instinctively find myself throwing in an extraordinary amount of slaps and staccatos with my fretting hand to create somewhat of a 'snap' throughout the performance of the tune.

Good luck and have fun. ■

SIMON MAYOR UK MANDOLIN MAESTRO

APP EXTRA

'GHYLL FORCE'

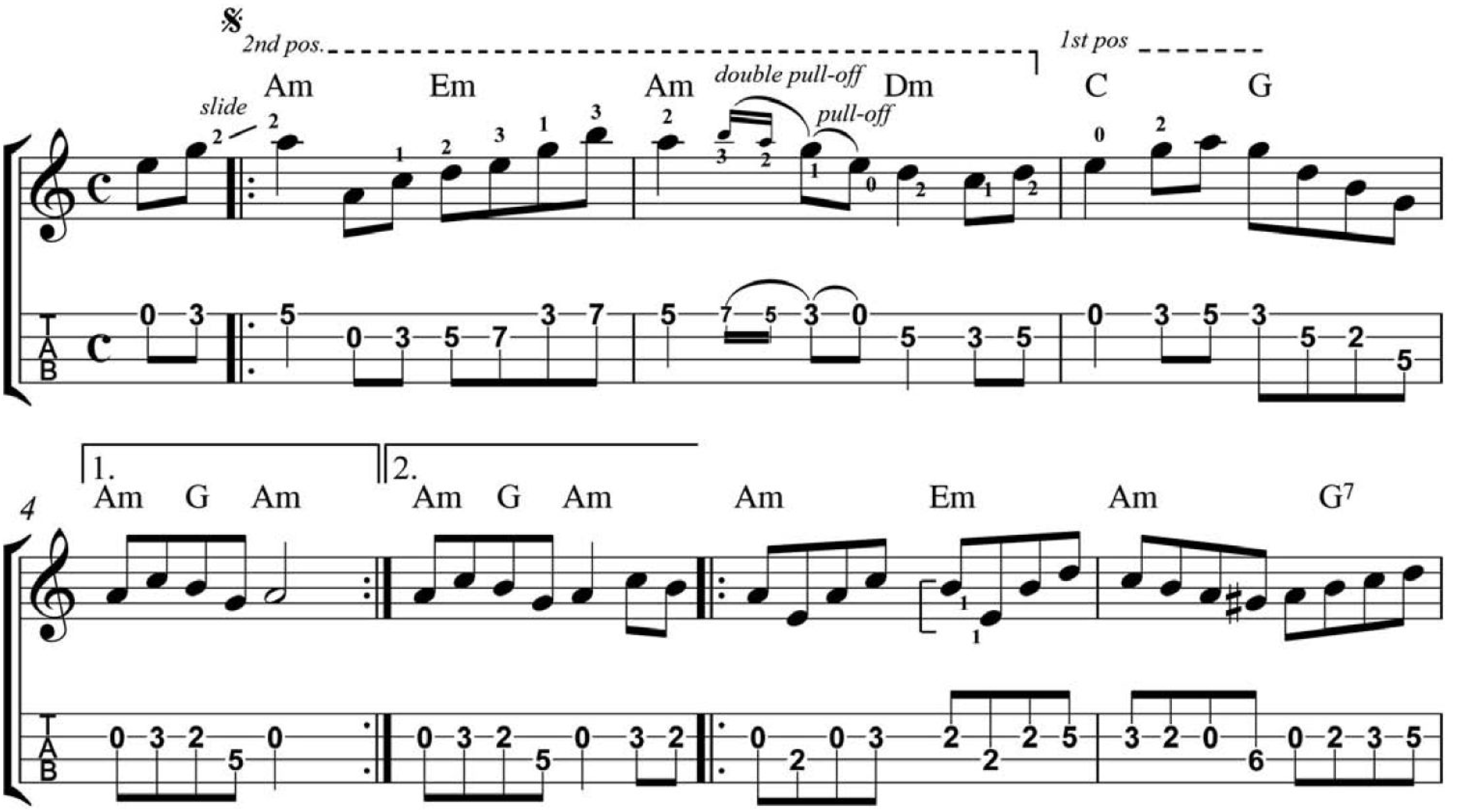
Simon Mayor blends traditional with non-traditional in this Yorkshire-inspired reel

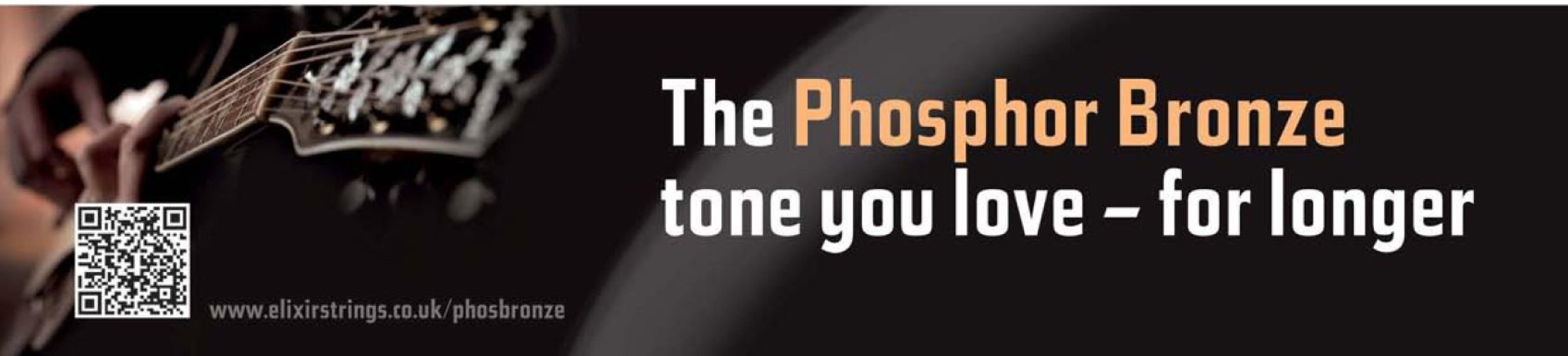
TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: SUITABLE FOR ALL

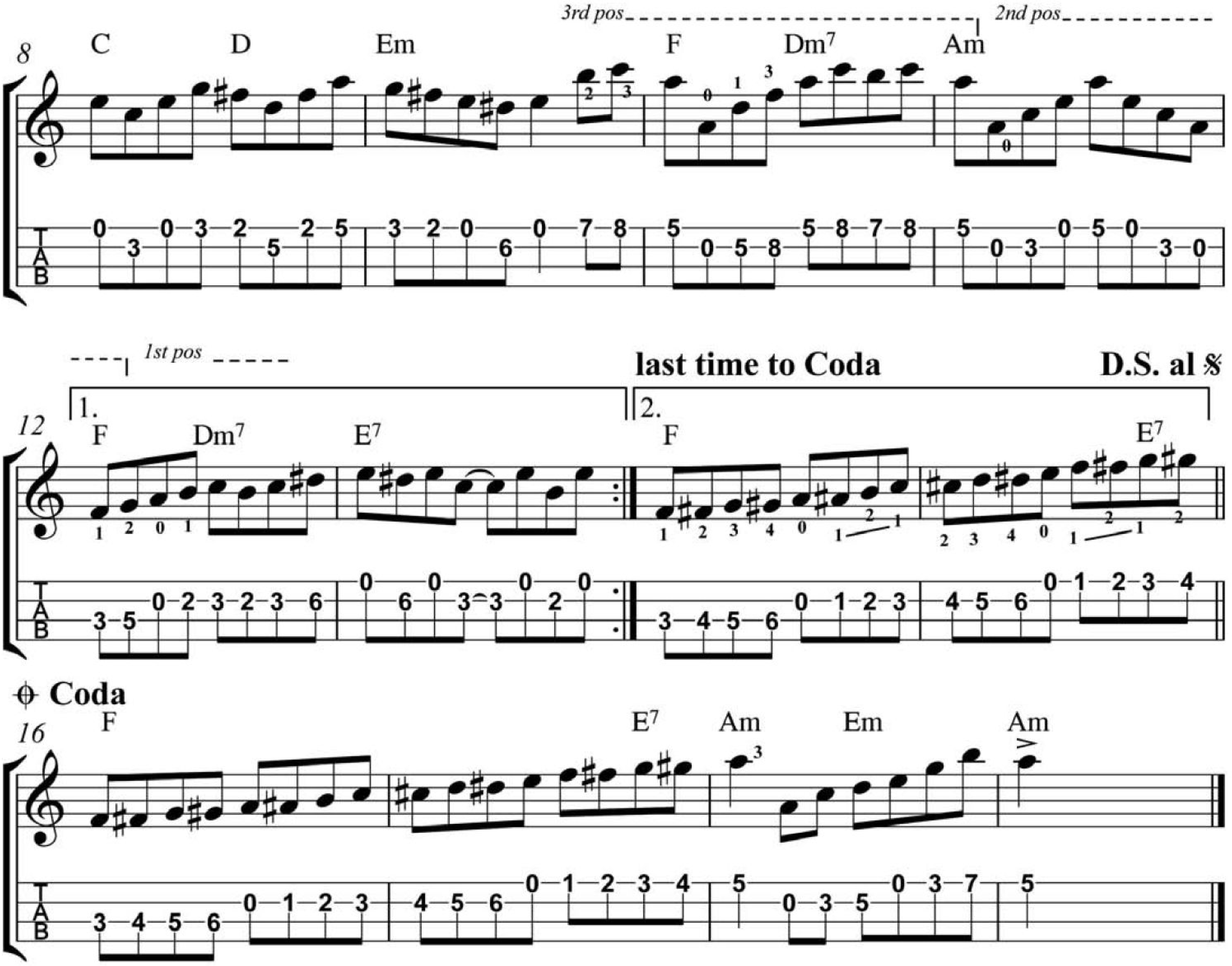
People find inspiration to write tunes in many different circumstances. Personally, I've never been very productive while staring at a blank sheet of manuscript paper, but sit me in front of *Desperate Housewives*, absent-mindedly doodling on the mandolin and I'll often come up with something. Another productive environment has been the Yorkshire Dales; many of the tunes I've written over the years have started from idly humming while out hiking. For some reason I find it a more artistically inspiring place than Reading, or even Swindon.

Once upon a time, composing tunes in such *al fresco* circumstances was fraught with danger: if inspiration struck on the upper reaches of Barden Moor and I had no pencil, paper or sound recorder, my masterpiece would be forgotten by the time I got home. More than once I've forced myself to keep whistling something all the way round a walk to make sure I didn't lose the muse. Nowadays, my portable recording equipment, otherwise known as a smart phone, usually accompanies me. 'Ghyll Force' dates from before such technology; it appeared 10 years ago on my album *Music From A Small Island* in a rather complex arrangement, but works fine with just some simple guitar chords behind it, which is how you'll hear it if you seek out the MP3s from this magazine's website. I've recorded a slower version

'GHYLL FORCE' – ARR. SIMON MAYOR







for practice and a faster version at performance speed. By the way, in case you didn't know, 'ghyll' is the local Yorkshire word for stream, and 'force' is a northern word for waterfall.

The form of this tune is of a traditional reel, but stylistically there are some decidedly non-traditional traits, notably the tricky chromatic run in bars 14 and 15 and similarly in 16 and 17 ('chromatic' means moving one semitone at a time either up or down).

Such runs on a mandolin are rarely easy, particularly if they comprise more than three or four notes. This is because they involve both position shifts and bunched left hand fingering. If they are high up the neck, out of first position, they can be very difficult indeed. Where possible – and it's possible here because we're down in first position – I'll always take advantage of any open strings. My preferred fingering as shown uses just one shift on each string. In bar 14, the first finger moves from fret one to fret three (A# to C), and then up the remaining fingers in sequence until we reach the open E on the top string. Exactly the same pattern then repeats on the top string. The first finger shift is only two frets, but you need to practise it until it sounds completely inaudible, as if you had six fingers on your left hand (if you have, it'll be easy). Once you've mastered this particular technique it will stand you in very good stead in many circumstances, chromatic or not.

Now let's look at a few other points of interest. Although it doesn't venture too high up the neck, the left hand moves around a little. There is no absolute reason why the first couple of bars should be played in second position as I've suggested. You can play them in first position if you want, but you'll then need to use your fourth finger on the high B, which is a weaker option to execute the decorative pull-offs I like to do in bar two. Playing this phrase in second position not only means you can make an audible slide from the G to the A right at the start of the tune (a stylistic preference but not a necessity), but it also conveniently brings the stronger third finger onto the B. Watch out for the half barré in bar six; you can play the B and E with the pad of the first finger.

Finally, notice that in all instances position shifts occur as we play open strings. When you're working out good fingerings for other tunes you're learning, always do this where you can as it gives a much smoother ride for the left hand.

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GORDON GILTRAP INSTRUMENTAL ARTIST

'POFACETILLY'

FULL TAB ONLINE

Gordon Giltrap explains how a commissioned piece about a funny looking cat became one of his most meaningful works

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: ADVANCED

Hello and welcome to my new column. This series will be a tad different – all the compositions will be in standard tuning! "How can this be?" I hear you cry, "when so much has been focused on weird and wacky tunings, partial capos, and the like." I have submitted pieces in standard tuning before – but it certainly has been a while! The first piece in the series is pretty much a brand new GG composition, and very important to me personally. But more of that later.

I have never been one to write screeds on how passages should be performed; in many ways, that can confuse the student. The same goes for this piece.

The quirky title comes from a friend of ours, Clare, who commissioned it as a surprise gift for her guitar-playing husband Tim's birthday. 'Pofacetilly' is a nickname for the family cat, who does indeed carry a po-faced expression when wandering round the house. I thought the title (Clare's idea) was a cracker.

The metronome marking of 100 gives it a nice, steady pace and certainly allows for breathing space when approaching the trickier passages. The piece should have a certain 'bounce' to it, giving it an air of fun.

The first 14 bars are pretty straightforward. From bar 15 and 16 onwards, things get a bit more interesting. I have always favoured as many open strings as possible in my compositions, because I just love the ringing sustain they give. What we have in these two bars are basically constructed around an ascending G major run. You could, for example, play the notes in bar 15 in the first position, but I think the tonality and feel changes when you move up the neck to accommodate fretted and open notes. Devotees of the great Chet Atkins will know that he approached things in a similar way.

> **"'Pofacetilly' is a nickname for the family cat – who does indeed carry a po-faced expression when wandering round the house"**

At the end of bar 16 you will see that the last note of that bar is followed by harmonics. When I perform this, I play the harmonics in tempo. If you find this awkward at first, a slight pause just before the harmonics will sound fine and quite natural.

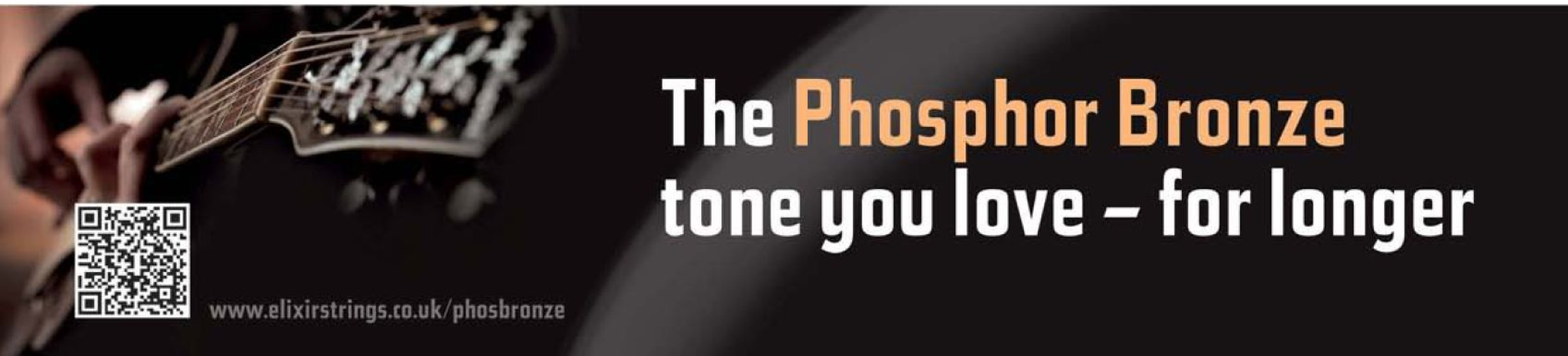
Moving on to the last note in bar 24 into bar 25, this should have a fairly jaunty feel. Bar 26 needs close attention when you move up to the 10th fret first string, and then into bar 27 where there are one or two challenging stretches. Bar 31 is fine but play the second fret sixth string a tad stronger, as it slides up the semitone to the third fret. This gives it a launch pad into bar 32.

We now turn our attention to bar 33, which features one of my favourite sections within the piece as it sounds quite joyful. The fourth finger is used to play the seventh fret on the sixth string.

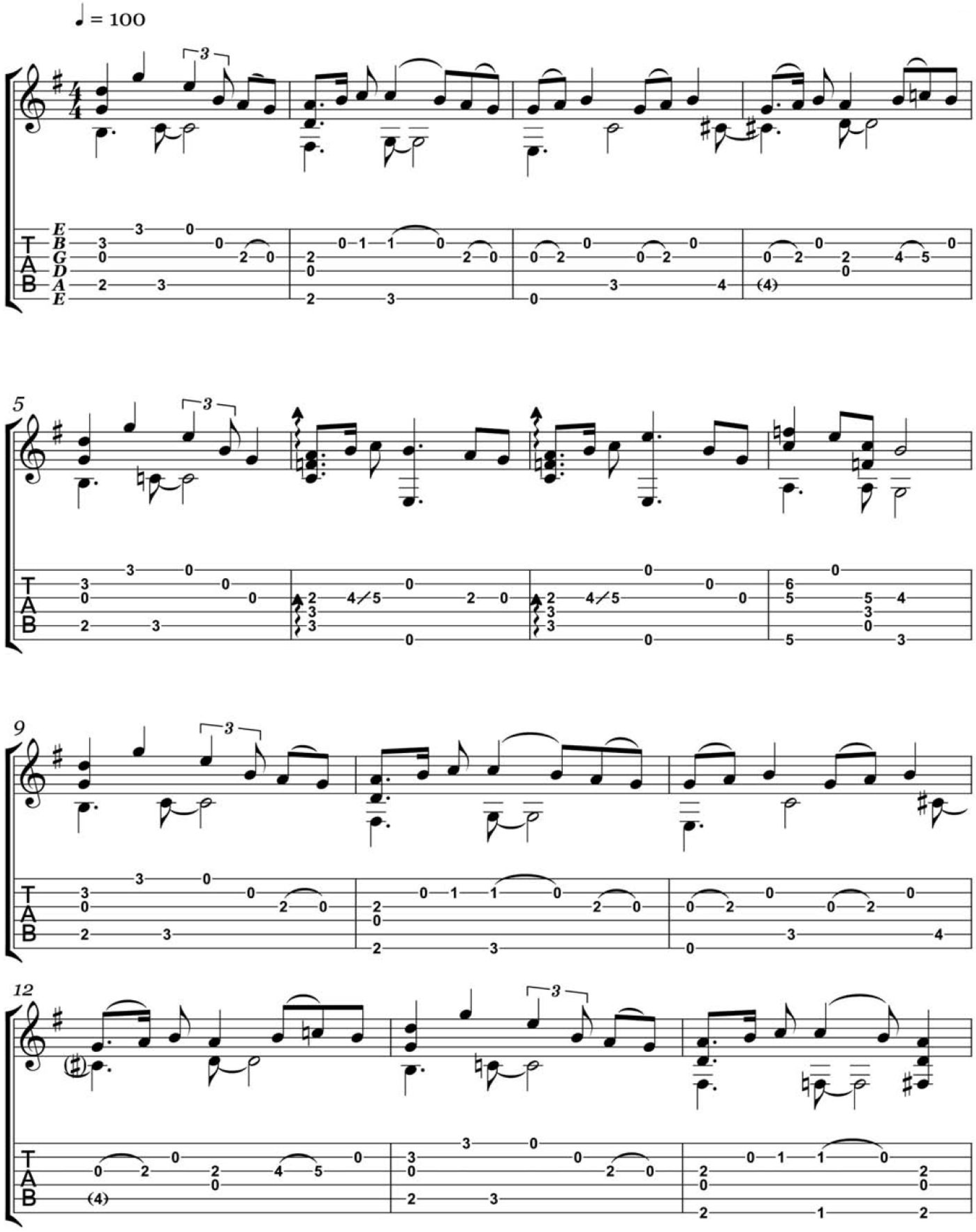
Bars 36 and 37 feature those lovely open strings within the fretted notes, and the coda develops the idea even further up until the harmonics and final low G.

I mentioned earlier about this piece and what it means to me. For a while I have had certain health issues. All is explained on my website, www.giltrap.co.uk, for anyone who is interested. Because of this there was a time when I had no desire to play. Without the incentive to compose this piece (and money played no part in this) I doubt it would have been written. Slowly I got back into playing again and my composing ability returned. There was a time when I truly thought it had deserted me.

Heartfelt thanks to Mark Thomson for the transcription and Clare Moore for requesting it be written. Unknown to her, she helped me beyond words, as did my beloved wife Hilary. Enjoy playing 'Pofacetilly' and… be well. ■



'POFACETILLY' – GORDON GILTRAP



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RAYMOND BURLEY CLASSICAL GUITARIST

'MERTZ'S POLACCA'

Raymond Burley guides us through a Grade 8 level piece equally suitable for lower levels

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: SUITABLE FOR ALL

In my last article, I covered the requirements of various graded guitar exams – and their pros and cons. A piece I'd like to focus on for this article is a charming 'polacca' by Mertz that both Trinity Guildhall and ABRSM include in the Grade 8 exam syllabus.

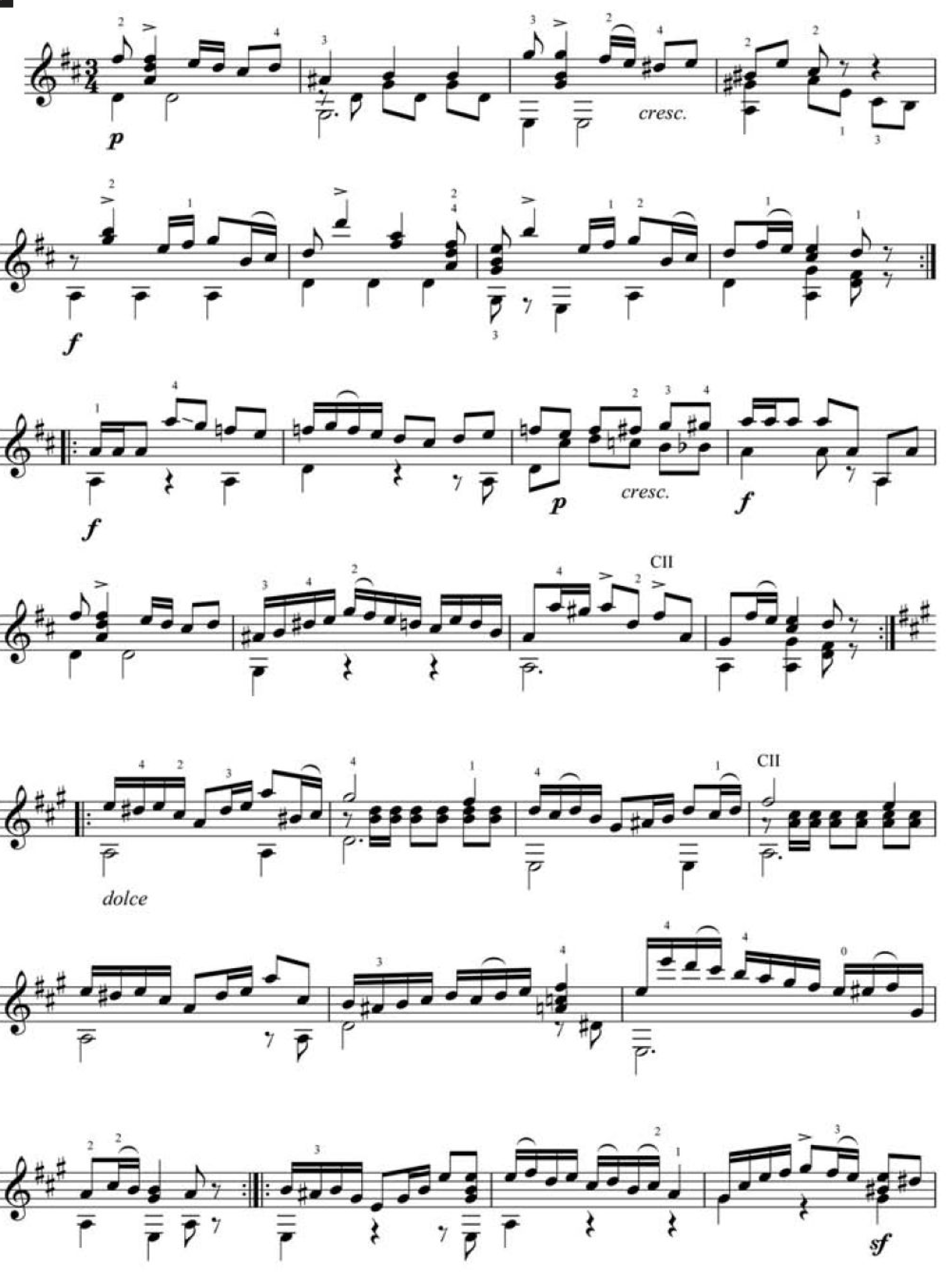
Johann Kaspar Mertz (1806-1856) was born in Pressburg (later to become Bratislava). He spent around 18 years of his life in Vienna, a cultural centre that became home to other prominent guitarists, guitar teachers and publishers such as Diabelli, Giuliani and Molitor.

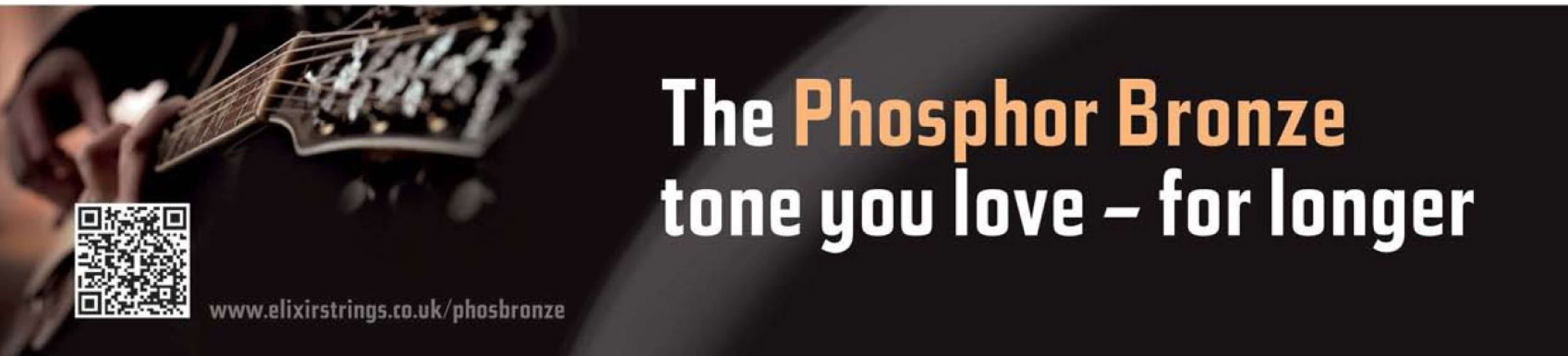
Mertz quickly established himself as a virtuoso on the instrument. Unlike many guitar composers of the time, his music was more pianistic, following the models of Schumann, Chopin, Schubert and Mendelssohn. His most famous contribution to the guitar repertory is a set of character pieces entitled Bardenklänge (Bardic sounds) very much in the style of Schumann.

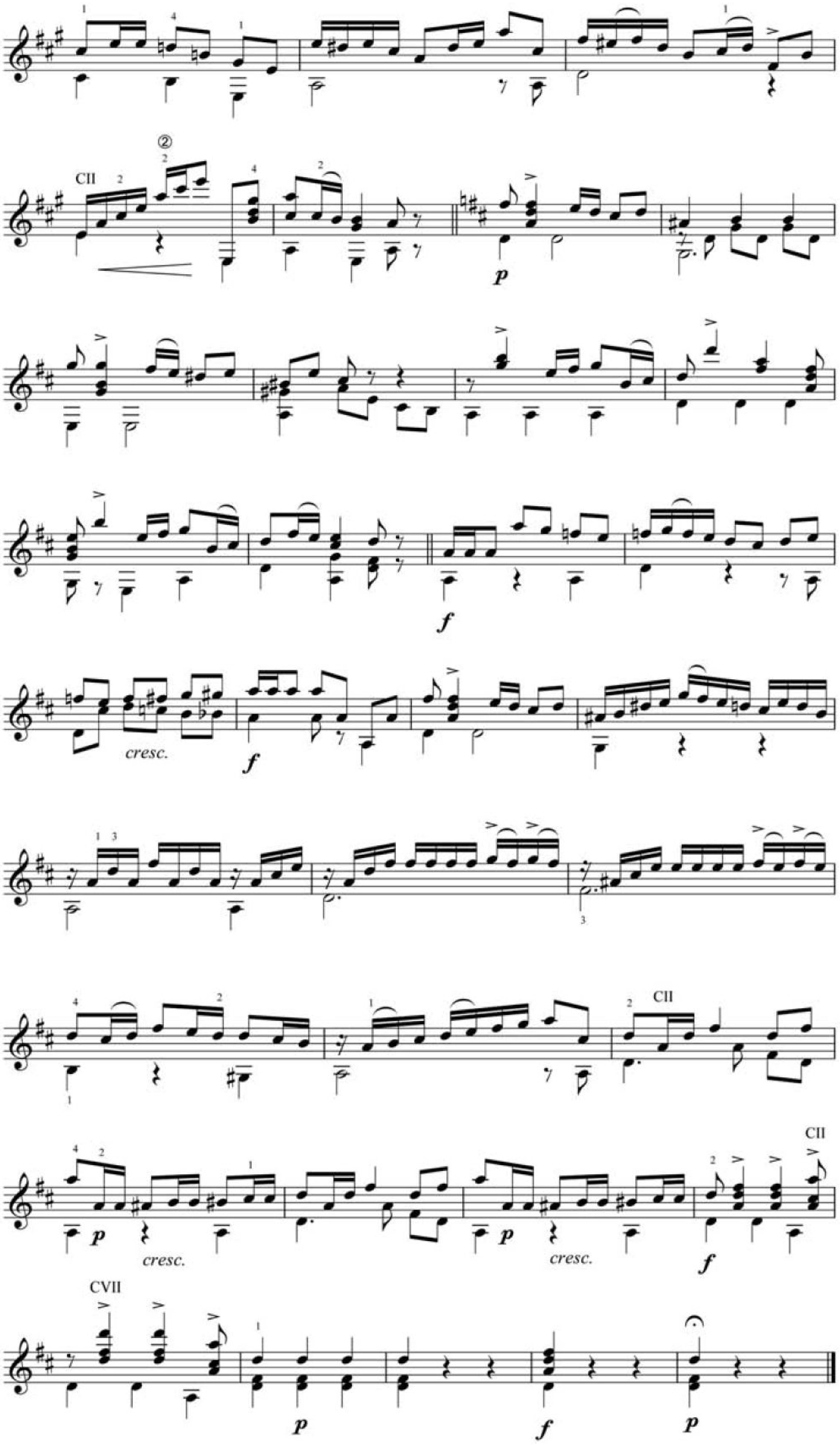
A polacca (polka or polonaise) is a dance of Polish origin and remains a part of popular folk music in many European countries.

Mertz's Polacca is, of course, a dance in name only but it's possible to establish the required tempo from this; I suggest a performance speed of between crotchet – 105-120.

Like many 19th century pieces it's not too difficult technically but the challenge is making music of the relatively few notes. In other words it requires imagination rather than technique. As far as modulations are concerned, much guitar music from this







period remains quite close to home and this piece is no exception – it begins in D major and moves to A major before returning to the home key and recapitulation.

Musically, in the opening bar, it works well to shorten the first quaver a little to throw the emphasis onto the accented chord that follows; there are many similar places where this effect can be employed: bars three, six and seven, for example.

In bar seven, the leap from the low D to the following high D is effective if a slight portamento is employed. At the end of the same bar it's advisable to use the left hand fourth finger for the middle note of the chord as it leaves the third finger free to move to the bass G in the next bar.

At bar 17 – the start of the A major section – you'll notice the term *dolce* (sweetly). Simply move your right hand towards the fingerboard to produce a sweeter (*tasto*) sound. Bar 18 can present a problem as you need to be careful to sustain the melodic Gb for its full length and avoid the repeated accompaniment notes drowning it out. Careful dynamic control is required here. You may find it beneficial to treat the slurred Bb to Cb at the end of the preceding bar as a first finger slide thus leaving the other fingers free for the following chord.

Bar 23 can be made easier if both a barré and the second finger are used for the arpeggio as it provides a connection to the high A on the 2nd string.

Notice the accented notes in bars 40 and 41 – these can be achieved with a light rest (*apoyando*) stroke.

I have taken the liberty of adding more dynamics markings; Mertz, it seems, indicated hardly any. There are many editions of the piece in published anthologies and on the internet, curiously very few of these are exactly the same. If a copy of the original exists I've yet to see it. Please don't be put off by the fact that it's considered by some to be Grade 8 standard. You may be pleasantly surprised. ■

MIKE DAWES FINGERSTYLE VIRTUOSO

FINGERSTYLE COMPOSITION

Mike Dawes gives a step-by-step guide to his method of songwriting

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE/ADVANCED

Hello and greetings from snowy Big Sky, Montana. I was playing around with some ideas in my hotel room this morning when the voice of a past student popped into my head. I teach a lot of people out here on the road and most want to learn specific guitar techniques or even song passages, but there are a few who ask the profound question "How do you write a tune?"

This question provides so many possible answers because, at least for me, every tune is inspired by different events and the approaches vary considerably.

In this column, I want to introduce you to my most frequently used approach to songwriting on instrumental acoustic guitar. Before delving in, I want you to try and forget everything you know about music, and simply see it as two fundamental ingredients: melody and harmony.

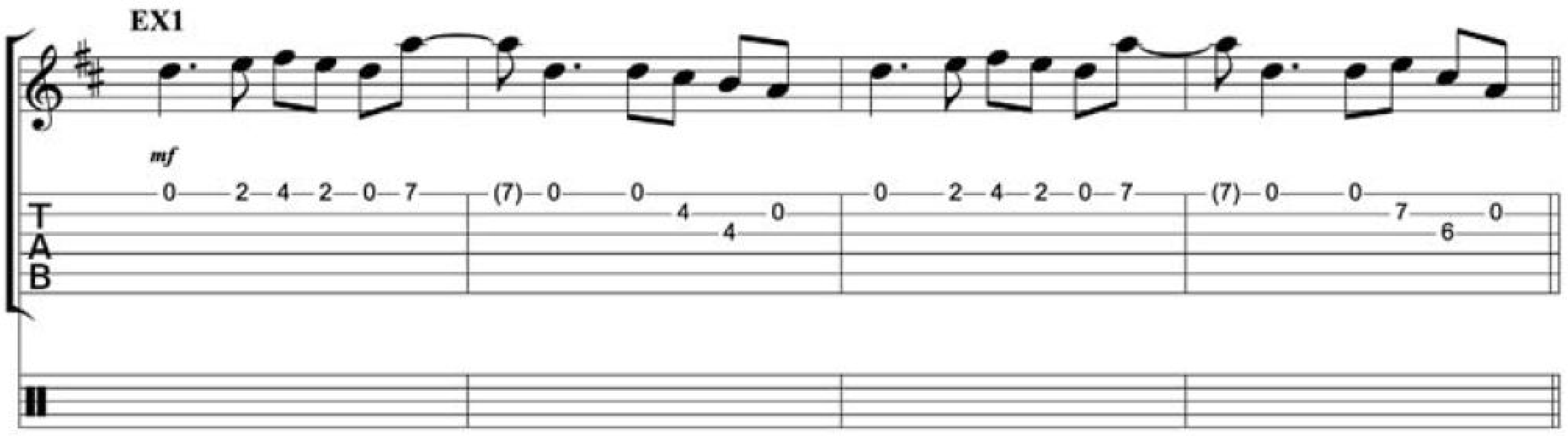
If you think about any song, the most important/memorable part is the melody to the tune itself, also known as top-line. The second key ingredient is the harmony in which it sits, in fingerstyle, usually a chord or bass-line. All arpeggios, percussion and rhythmic accessories are all extras and really non-essential. This is why when we hear our favourite pop musicians singing their songs 'unplugged' they use a guitar or piano rather than a drumkit. If Eric Clapton played the acoustic 'Layla' on the drums the top-line just wouldn't work. There must be a harmony of some sort to create a 'feel'.

I'd like to demonstrate how I would go about composing a piece of music by starting with a melodic idea, then building a harmony around it in the form of single bass notes, before finally embellishing it to become a standalone fingerstyle performance. This is similar to how producers will work on pop songs to add the finishing touches, even if the completed 'song' is already recorded.

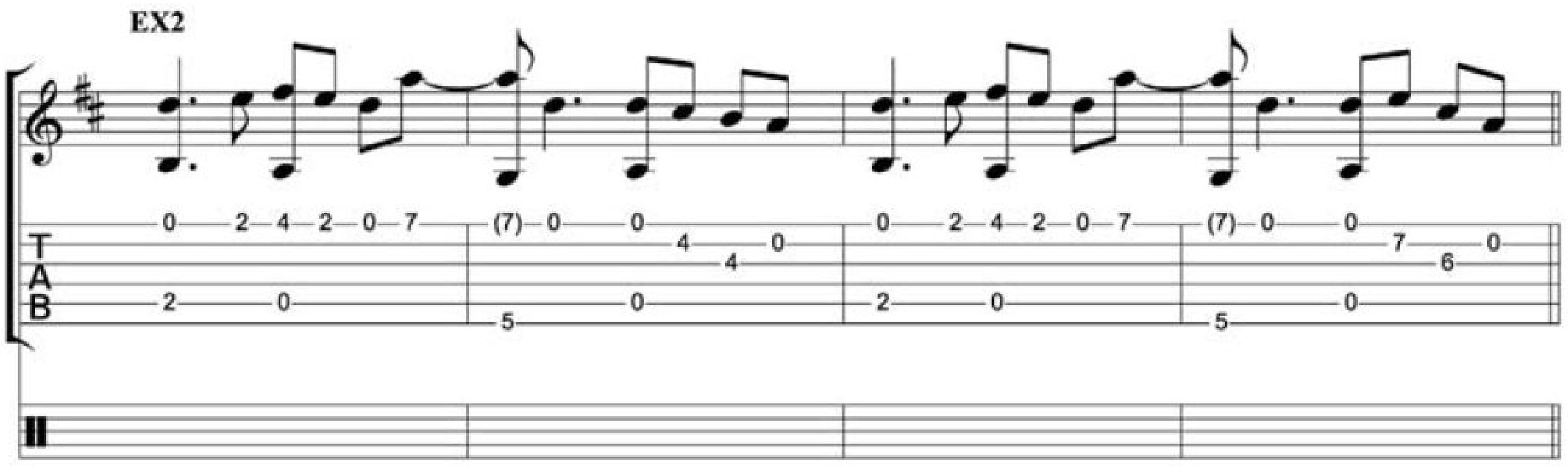
EXAMPLE 1

The extract below features a major melody in DADGAD tuning. Familiarise yourself with the tune, it's simple and ticks all the cheese boxes, however there is currently no harmony. It is alone and exposed.

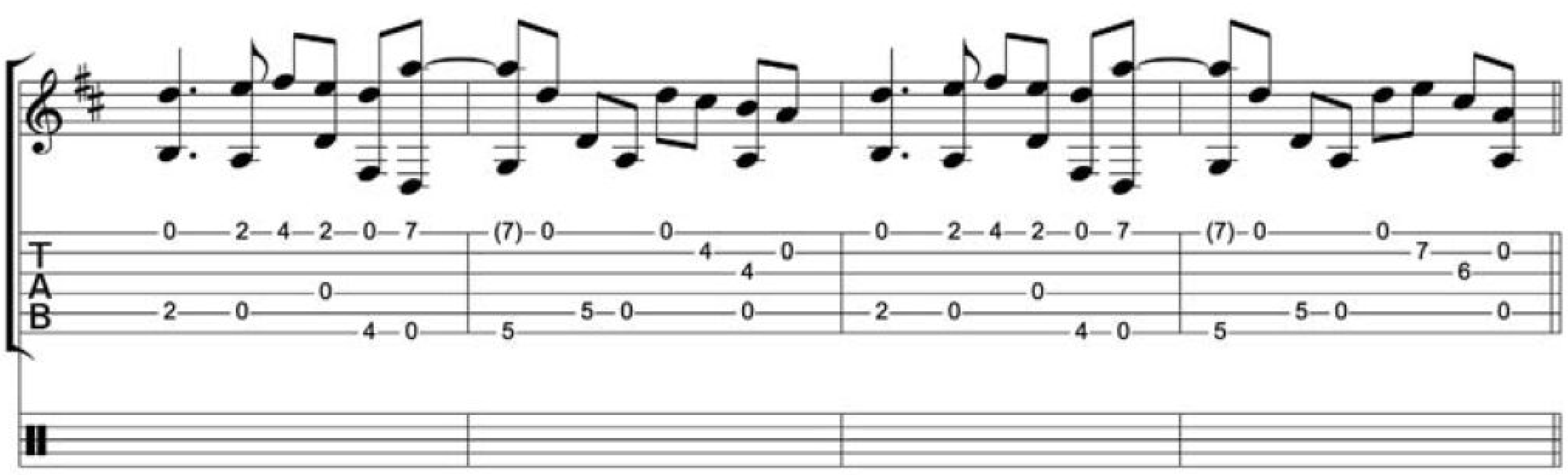
EXAMPLE 1

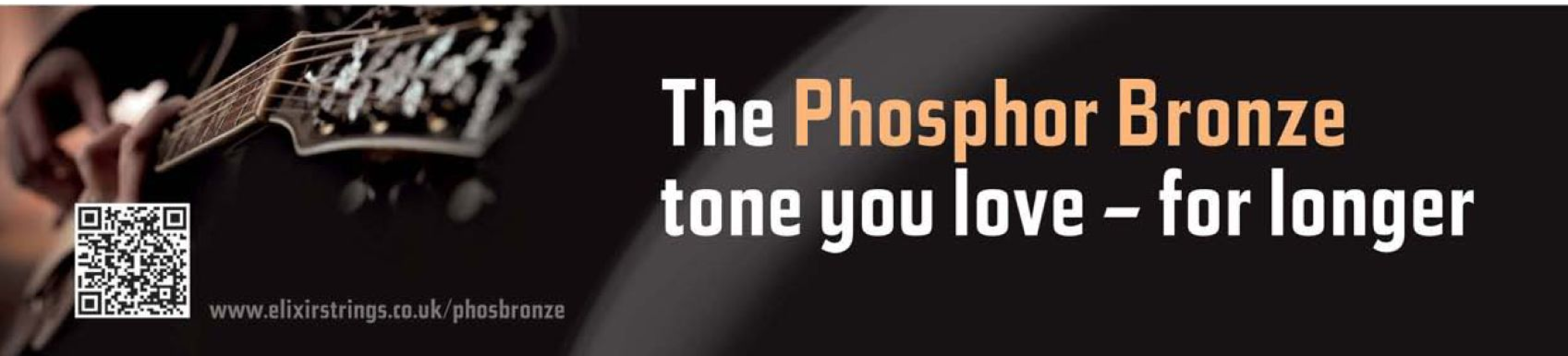


EXAMPLE 2

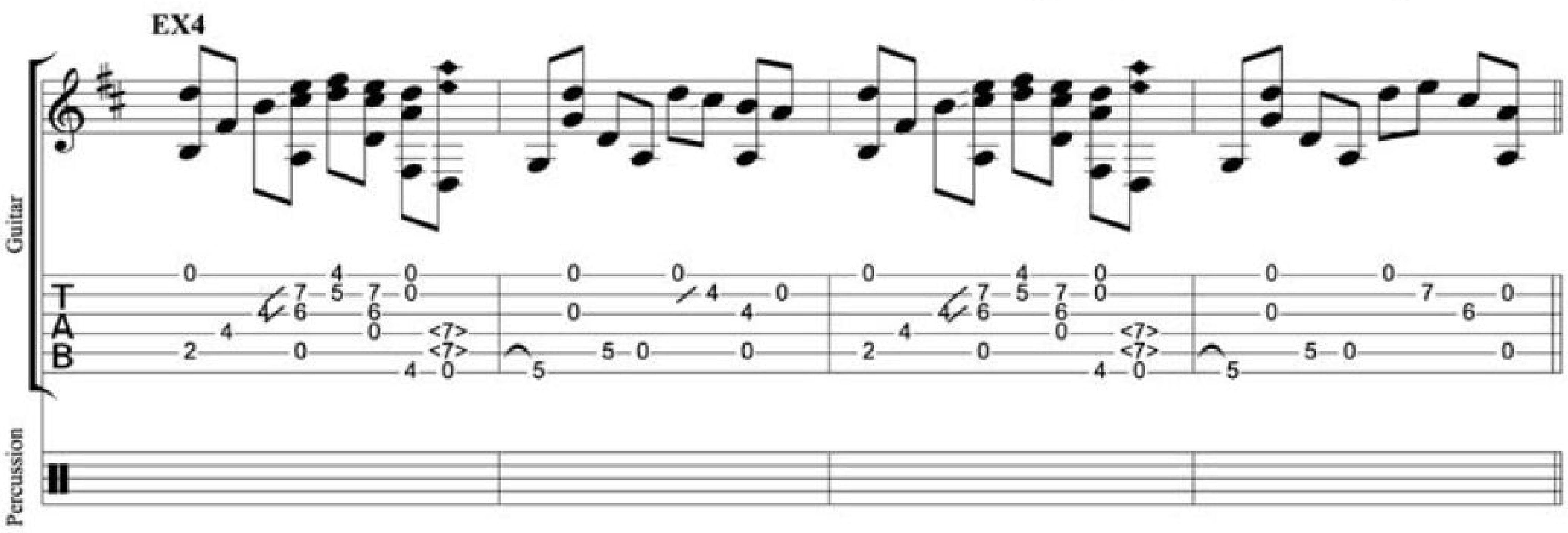


EXAMPLE 3

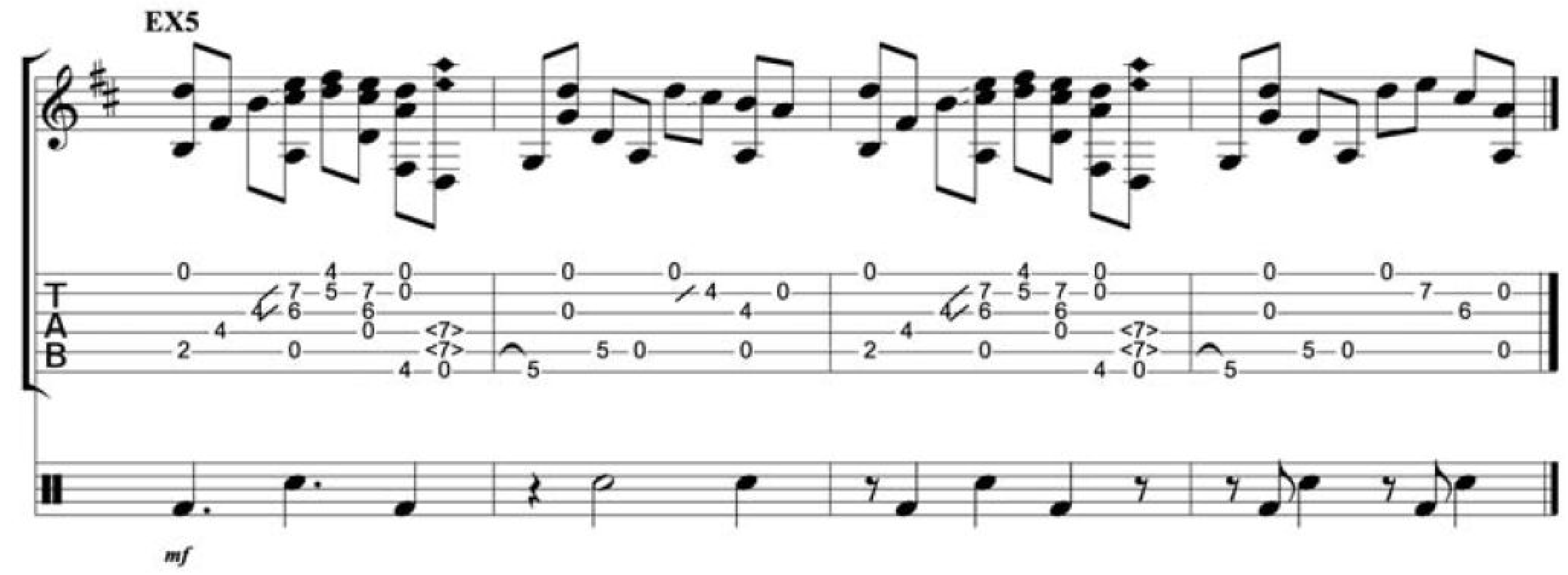




EXAMPLE 4



EXAMPLE 5



EXAMPLE 2

The second stage in this process is adding that bass-line, the harmony. Here I have selected three simple root notes that convey the relative minor (B). Once we add this harmony, the 'feel' of the song begins to take form.

EXAMPLE 3

Once you are comfortable with this, you can start to enhance the bass-line, moving away from simple beat one roots and performing a line similar to that which an actual bassist would play.

EXAMPLE 4

The next stage in 'tarting up' our tune is filling in those middle strings. We have treble (melody) we have bass (harmony) but we need that middle. In this extract I am not only arpeggiating appropriate chord shapes, I am adding in some close harmony to the melody itself – imagine a backing vocal arrangement or Thin Lizzy-style lead accompaniment here.

EXAMPLE 5

Finally we can add some percussion to wrap up the section. Here I am adding kick and snare drum effects with the heel of my hand striking the top to produce the kick, and my right hand thumb striking the bottom string to produce the snare click. If you've been following these columns you should be well trained in these extended techniques. If not, feel free to YouTube some of the lessons I have up online.

Now I must state that this is not the only approach to composing fingerstyle tunes, but I would say that for me, it is my primary 'go to' method. Have fun with this and see if you can come up with your own music using this approach. Good luck! ■

CHRIS GIBBONS COMPOSER

COUNTRY GUITAR: DOUBLE STOPS

Chris Gibbons uses a technique borrowed from the violin world

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: SUITABLE FOR ALL

The term ‘double stop’ is taken from the violin family range of techniques, where a note is said to be ‘stopped’, or formed by accurate placement of finger on fretboard as there are no frets; a double stop is thus two notes played simultaneously.

In country guitar, playing this technique is used frequently to enrich single note lines into a harmony line. To form a harmony there needs to be a nice sounding interval between the two notes, and the interval of a 3rd and a 6th are the ‘sweet’ intervals.

I have notated a G scale in these two intervals at the start of the exercises and I'd like you to practise them slowly until they become as natural as playing a single note scale. Whereas the 3rds occur on adjacent strings and can be played with a single pick stroke, the 6ths have a string between the two played notes; you can use thumb and forefinger or if using a pick, the pick and middle finger to sound the two notes.

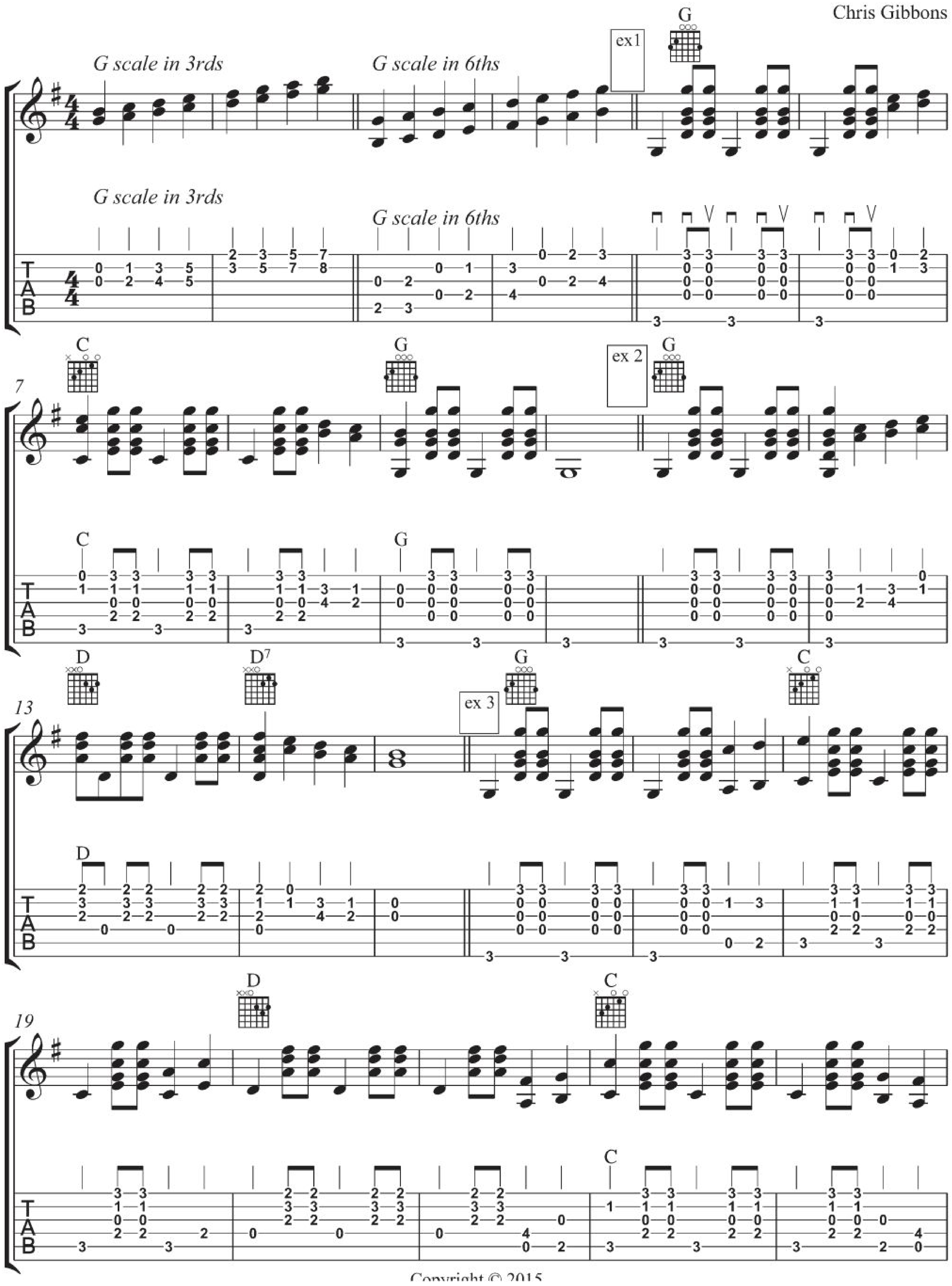
In **example 1** we use a simple double stop to connect the G to C chord change, and then back again.

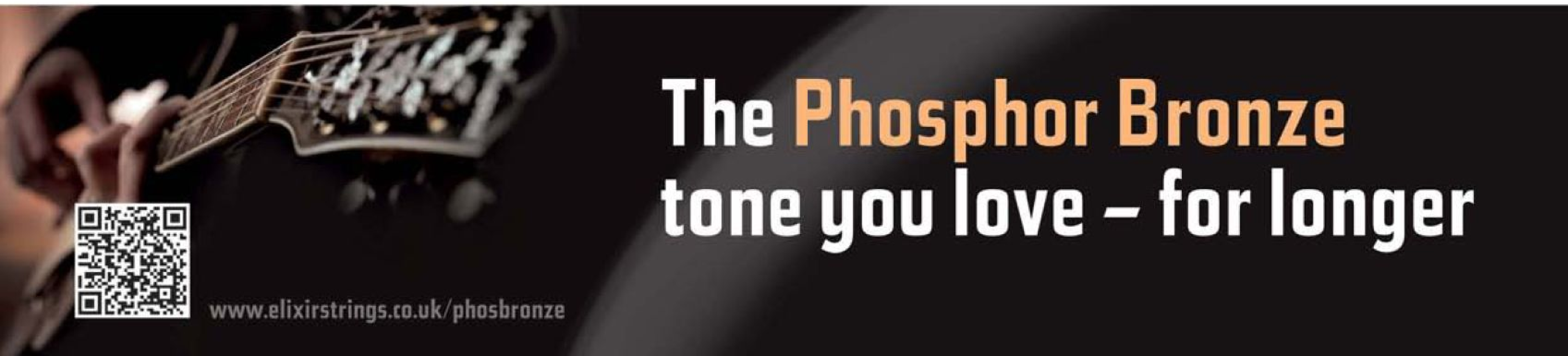
Example 2 is a longer connecting line, so strive for accuracy of fingering in the left hand to produce a clean and robust tone.

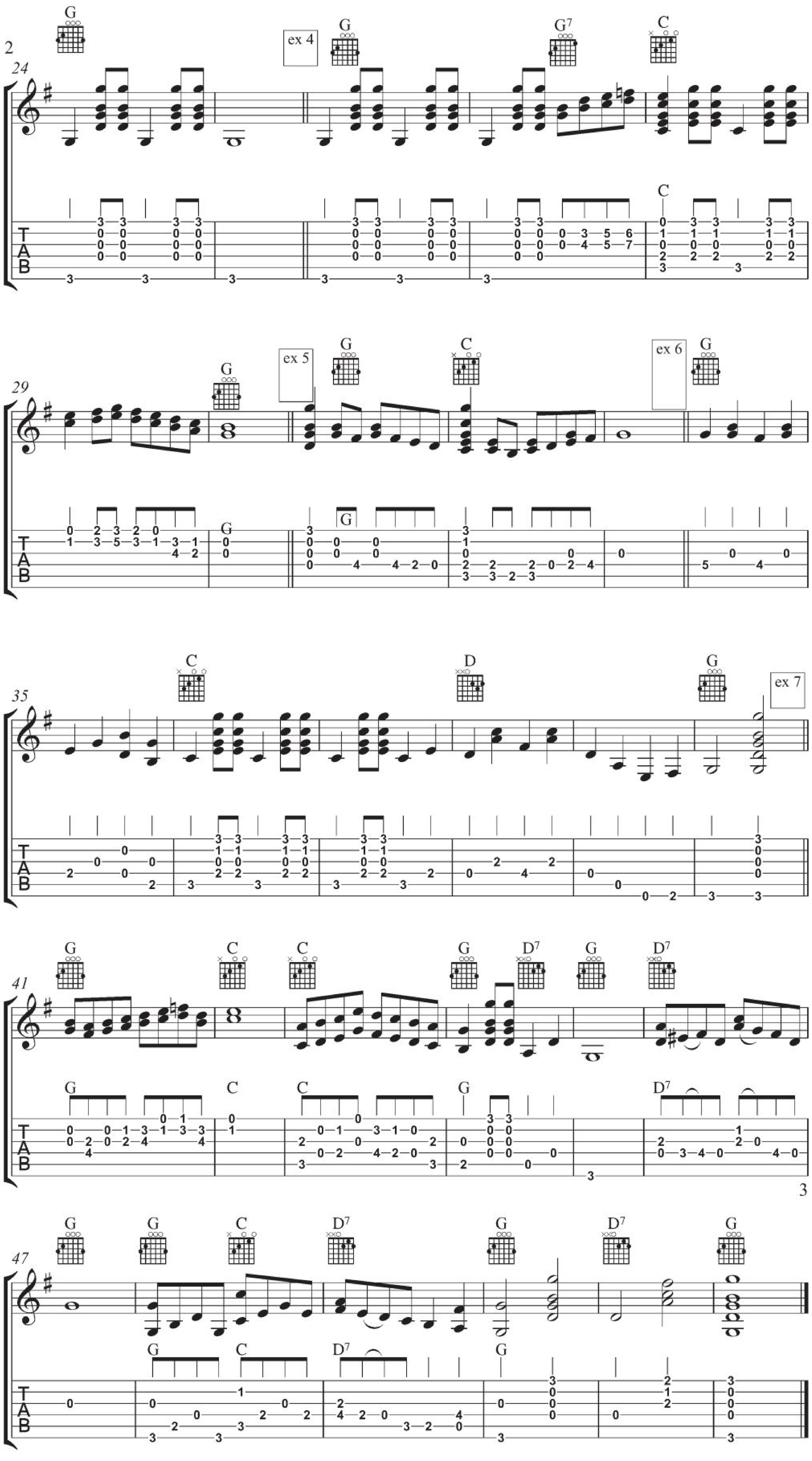
In the second bar of **example 3,** we use an interval of a 10th (an octave and a third) to move from the G to C, and the interval of a 6th to move from C to D, then D to C and back to G.

In **example 4,** we change the F# to an F natural in the connecting line, as the G7 chord has an F natural, not F#.

Here the line is in eighth notes (quavers) so you'll need to move smoothly from one







> **"In country guitar playing this technique is used frequently to enrich single note lines into a harmony line"**

pair of notes to the next. If you are using a pick, try using all down strokes on the line for an even sound.

In **example 6,** we show how it's possible, even desirable in some contexts, to add the harmony to just a few notes, allowing a more delicate texture from the connecting lines and fills. Do feel free to experiment with this yourself, adding harmonies to continuous lines or just picking out the odd couple of notes.

We round off this issue's study with **example 7** where we employ all the options of 3rds, 6ths and partial harmonisation of lines to create a very attractive arrangement.

All these exercises are designed to open your creative channels and options in your own playing. Yes, it is important to get the written notation played accurately but more so to provide you with the fuel for experimentation with your own music. ■

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PAUL BRETT VINTAGE GUITAR EXPERT AND 12-STRING AFICIONADO

APP EXTRA

FULL TAB ONLINE

12-STRING CORNER

Paul Brett salutes a departed superstar

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: SUITABLE FOR ALL

The most exciting time for creativity in music was during the 1960s, when freedom of expression was rife and young musicians were trying just about anything out. Many artists from back in the 60s have transcended time to become legendary icons, and when they pass the whole world appears to be lauding their contributions and many modern artists suddenly admit that such icons were their inspiration.

The media spews forth hastily compiled tributes, many padded out by journalists who were either not born or had never met the artist in question. All this verbiage of course adds to the legend, and lying in wait are the usual vultures in the record companies who see another vast fortune from back catalogue releases.

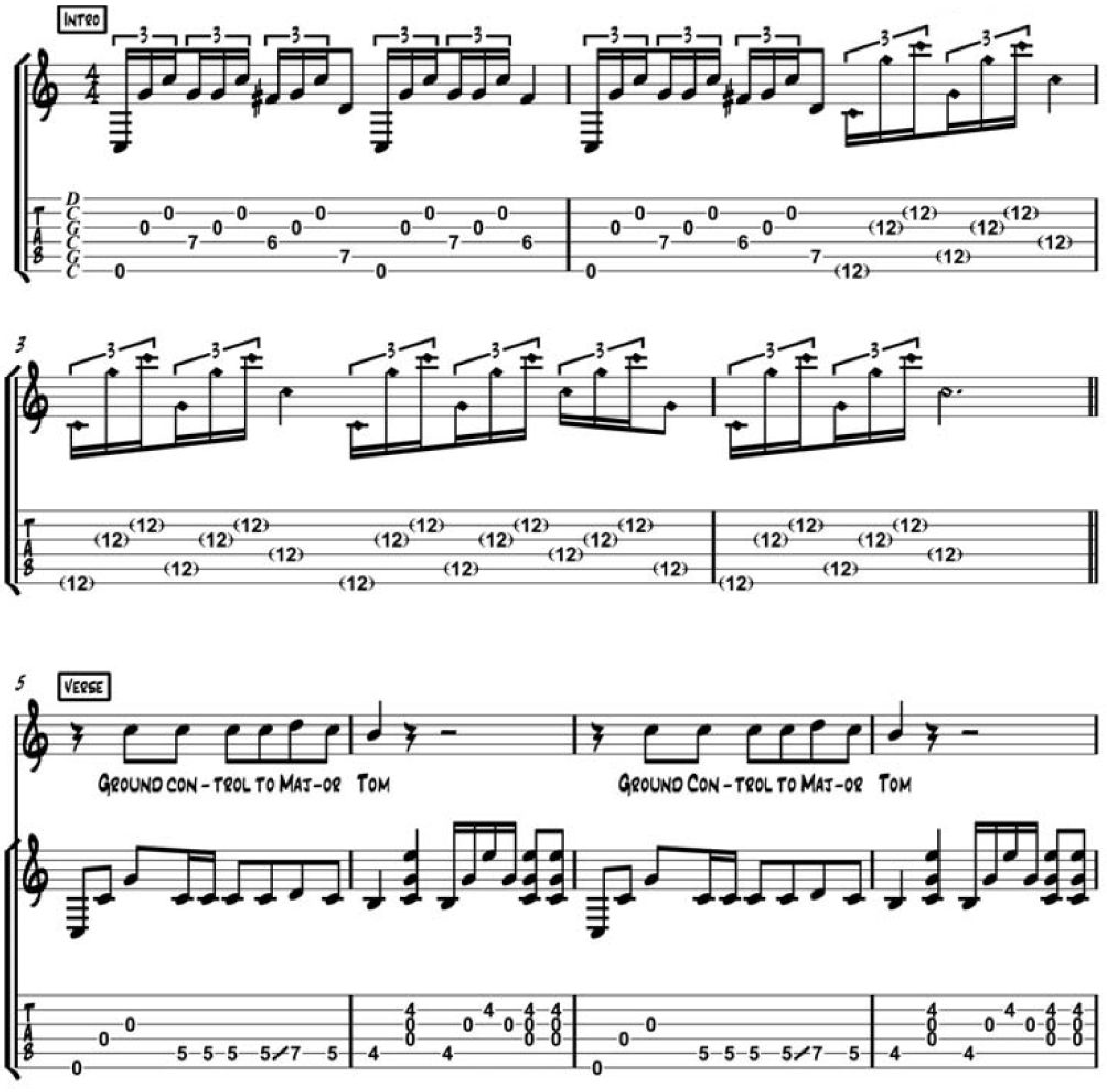
One such icon that passed recently was David Bowie, who, alongside the Beatles, Rolling Stones and others from the 60s, shaped the future of popular music. The volume of work, plus the creative and controversial imagery that Bowie created, was a lifetime's work, culminating in his final album *Blackstar*, where it is mooted that in the track 'Lazarus', he acted out his own death scenario; creative and in control of his path until the end of his earthly life.

Many commentators say that no one really knew Bowie and that he was a man who kept himself very much to himself. But the volume of interviews he did in the press over the years somewhat offsets those opinions, at least from a professional viewpoint. Who really knows anyone in their private capacity, and over the years people change depending on circumstances and experiences? So I would personally prefer to comment on the actual time that I knew David – a period in the late 60s that centred around the London folk scene.

He used to gig around a lot and I first met him at The White Bear in Hounslow, when I was working with the Strawbs. The Hounslow Arts Club (as Dave Cousins, singer and songwriter of the Strawbs, named the club), was a popular and well attended venue at the time. Lots of musicians would play and socialise there as it had a great atmosphere. Bowie was just like the rest of us when it came to the love of creating new music. We were all on a roller coaster of creativity and keen to experiment. David's first massive hit was 'Space Oddity', the opening lines of which are immortalised in pop history.

"Ground control to Major Tom" opens this iconic song and was the forerunner to some of the most groundbreaking music and

'SPACE ODDITY' – DAVID BOWIE/ARR.PAUL BRETT



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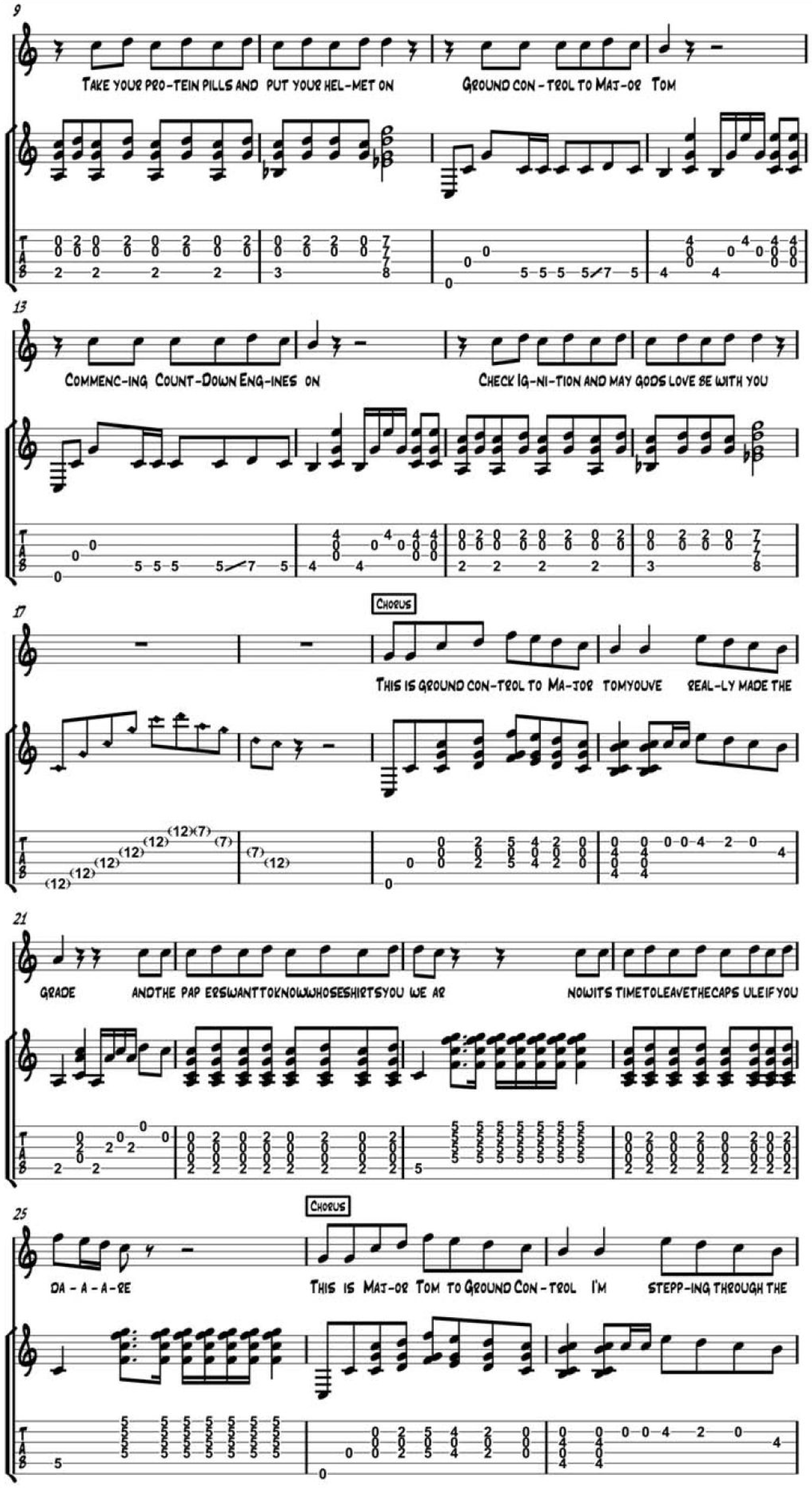

accompanying imagery ever seen by the world. David was always intent of pushing new boundaries in what he did and so many people across the generations benefited from it, whether purely from a listening point of view or because it inspired other musicians to go forth and experiment. My personal memory of David was that he was a really nice guy at the time I knew him. In fact, my friend Doug Morter of Hunter Muskett and other notable groups posted this comment recently: "I'm in Norway producing and playing on some recordings of my good mate Jim Gordon, along with fellow Wheel members, Foss Paterson, Alan Thomson, and Arran Ahmun, and we are all shocked by the loss of David Bowie, a true rock icon, and innovator. Where would the glam rock movement have been without him? I will always remember him from the early Hunter Muskett days when we played at his club in Beckenham, and he came on stage to quiet the audience down when we had the formidable task of playing there at the same time 'Space Oddity' had hit the charts. Of course, the whole crowd was there for him, but he came on, and told them all to shut up and listen to us, which, of course, they did. We spent a bit of time with him around that period, at his gigs in and around south London – and he was a gracious man, and generous with his enthusiasm for local talent, including us, at that time. A great loss."

I would switch the emphasis now towards David's use of a 12-string guitar. I remember him being impressed with John Joyce's 12-string playing and he too was taken with the chordal tones of a 12-string. He played a few different brands over the years: Framus, Espana, Hagstrom and a Vox XMk11 (electric), which sold at auction alongside hand written lyrics for a combined sum of nearly $50,000 in July 2013. Because of David's long-term association with a 12-string and in the period where I knew him, the one song I would like to offer you a solo fingerstyle arrangement of is of course 'Space Oddity'. So I hope all you space cadets out there will get to grips with a different interpretation of this great song and remember Bowie as someone who (to paraphrase Captain James T. Kirk) 'boldly went where no man has gone before.' ■

You can see a full video of Paul's version of 'Space Oddity' at: https://youtu.be/vuP2KTzaKuM. Thanks to Mark Thompson for the tablature.

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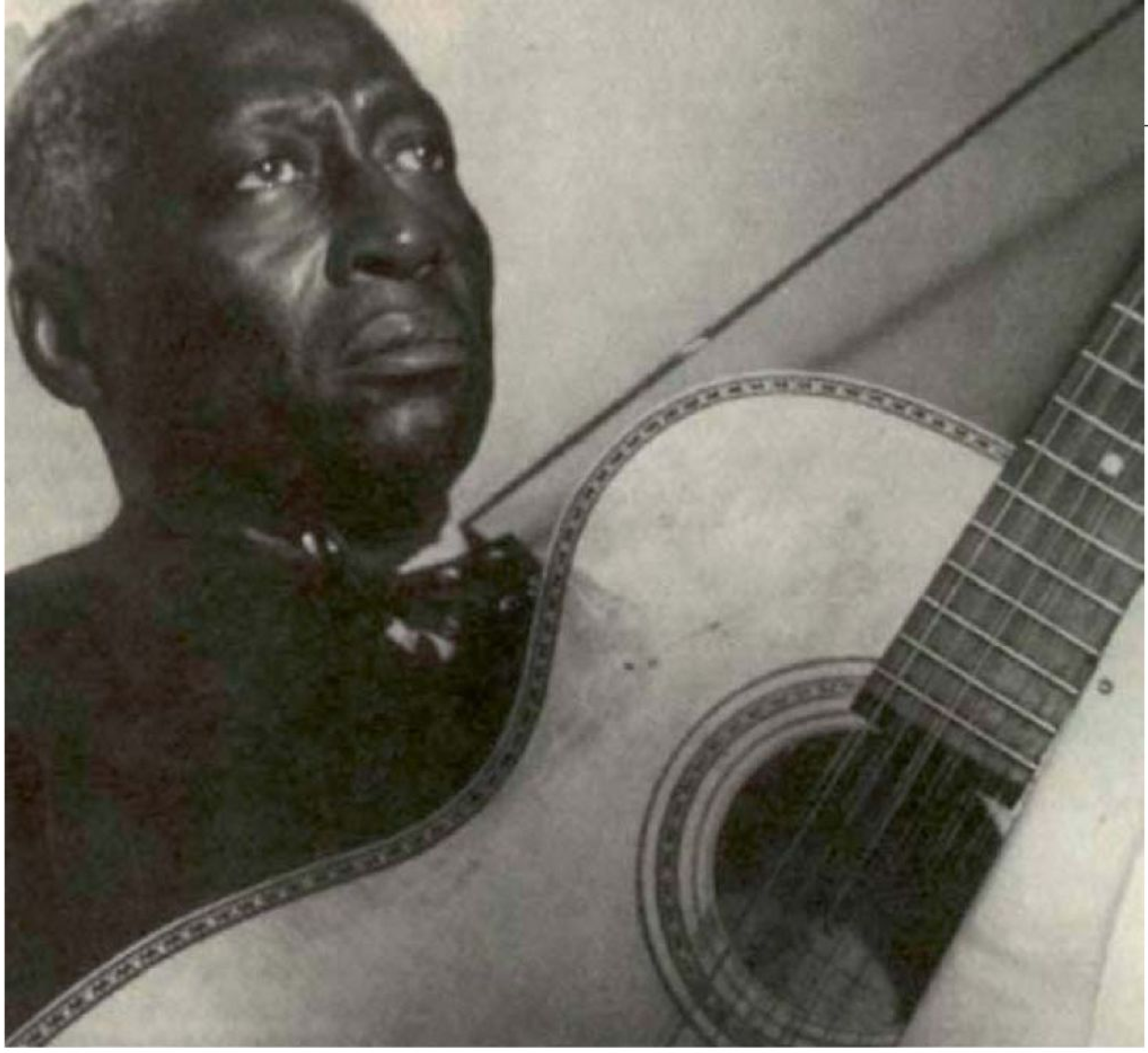
Paul Brett turns his column over to retiring 12-string collector and researcher Neil Harpe, who traces the history of the American 12-string guitar

COLLECTORS' CORNER

It would seem that my colleague Neil Harpe, who has probably done more than most over the years to sing the praises of the original Oscar Schmidt-made Stella Guitars, has decided to call it a day and bow out of offering blues guitar aficionados the chance to purchase and play these iconic instruments. Neil is going to concentrate all his creative efforts on his considerable painting skill instead. He will still, of course, continue to play and I'm sure he has still kept a few tasty morsels in his possession. Stella and Sovereign guitars of the 20s and 30s are very much the guitars the blues pioneers played, and over the years they have become synonymous with just about every blues player from that golden era. They were the working man's guitar and sold at affordable prices. The most famous son who played a Stella 12-string was Huddie Ledbetter, affectionately known as Leadbelly. Out of respect, and with Neil's permission, I am going to turn the rest of this column over to him to explain the origin of 12-string guitar in America, as, for many years, he has been a true fan, collector, researcher and seller of vintage Oscar Schmidt Stellas...

The exact origin of the American 12-string guitar is open to speculation, *writes Neil Harpe*. Evidence suggests that the 12-string as we know it today, strung with steel strings and tuned in octaves, is mostly a New World invention that evolved towards the end of the 19th century. One can trace its roots to various parts of Europe, where multi-coursed stringed instruments date back to before the Renaissance. Early examples include the English cittern, the Italian ceterone and the Portugese viola amarantina, which often has distinctive twin heart-shaped sound holes. Through several centuries of European settlement and later waves of immigration, various multi-string members of the guitar family were either brought to, or evolved in the Americas. Dozens now exist in Latin America alone: the bajo sexto, tiple, requinto, vihuela, guitarrón, charango and many more. Some have gut strings and others use metal or wire strings. It is difficult to say exactly when the 12-string guitar first emerged on the American musical instrument scene. But by the turn of the 20th century the 12-string guitar seems to have been pretty well-established, and musical instrument manufacturers throughout the country had begun offering 12-string guitars.

In Baltimore, Carl C. Holzapfel began producing large bodied 12-string guitars in 1898. Early Holzapfel sales records show that by 1906 their 12-string guitars were actually outselling their six-string models. Chicago's Lyon & Healy Company listed 12-string guitars in their 1905 catalogue. By 1912, the catalogue of New York distributor Charles Bruno & Son offered grand concert and auditorium sized 12-string guitars as well as a 10-string 'Italian Model' guitar. The John F. Barrows Company of Saginaw, Michigan also made 12-strings, sold under the Waldo name. To the south, the Louis Grunewald Musical Instruments Company, located in New Orleans, advertised their version of the 12-string guitar as the 'Grunewald Harp-Guitar'. Grunewald's ads boasted that their instrument was "the king



of guitars" and "the acme of perfection" with "twice the tone of any guitar". Grunewald also sold a five course 10-string version.

Around this time, a number of independent luthiers living in New York City were also making large bodied 12-string guitars. A short list includes Raphael Ciani, Antonio Cerrito, Fulvio Pardini, the Favilla Brothers and Antonio Grauso. Most of the instruments made by these luthiers had very long scales (string length from nut to saddle). The Oscar Schmidt Company's famous Stella 12-string guitars were based on this Italian design. In fact, some of these Italian-American luthiers worked at the Schmidt factory in New Jersey. For example, Pardini was the shop foreman there during the 1930s.

The 12-string guitar probably appealed to many musicians simply for its novelty, offering them an interesting and unique new sound. Vintage photographs of various early 20th century musical ensembles will occasionally show a member of the group with a 12-string guitar. In immigrant communities the 12-string was both appealing and familiar. Portuguese musicians in New England, Italians in urban centres such as New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, and Mexican players in the southwest tended to favour the 12-string guitar. To serve these markets during the first half of the 20th century, companies such as Oscar Schmidt, Harmony, Regal, Tonk Brothers, Charles Bruno and Son, Weymann, and Vega all produced 12-string guitars

By the 1920s, 12-string guitars could be heard on recordings by various performers. Mexican musician Lydia Mendoza began her recording career in 1928. Her recordings featured magnificent and powerful 12-string guitar accompaniment to her singing. Around the same time, bluesman Lonnie Johnson recorded virtuoso pieces on a 12-string guitar. Among Johnson's most notable performances on the instrument were a series of historic instrumental guitar duets, recorded with legendary jazz guitarist Eddie Lang.

THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE 12-STRING GUITAR

Any discussion of the history of the 12-string guitar must pay tribute to Louisiana-Texas songster Huddie 'Leadbelly' Ledbetter. Leadbelly remains one of the most famous 12-string players of them all. In his youth, he had been the traveling companion of none other than Blind Lemon Jefferson. It was during this early period, before 1920, that Leadbelly first began playing the 12-string guitar. He may have first encountered the instrument in the hands of Mexican performers.

The young Ledbetter was a pretty rough character. In 1918 he was sentenced to 30 years in a Texas prison for killing a man. Eventually his singing captured the attention of the Texas governor and he was granted a pardon in 1925. A few years later Leadbelly was in trouble with the law again, sentenced to 10 years' prison time in Louisiana for attempted murder. He was released from the notorious Angola Prison in 1934. However, his release this time was not by 'singing his way out of jail'. Instead, he was simply released as part of the state's effort to reduce prison overcrowding.

Through the efforts of folklorist John Lomax, Leadbelly became an important fixture in the folk music movement of the late 1930s and 1940s. Soon after moving to New York City in 1934, he became friends with folksingers Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston and Pete Seeger, among others. (For a detailed account of Huddie Ledbetter's life, I recommend reading *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* by Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell).

Leadbelly died in 1949, one year before his song 'Irene Goodnight' became a national hit for the Weavers. In Britain, Lonnie Donegan had a big hit with another of Leadbelly's songs,'The Rock Island Line'. During the next decade, as folk music became more and more popular, Leadbelly's fame spread far and wide. And with it, there came a renewed interest in his instrument, the 12-string guitar.

It is interesting to note that neither Gibson nor C. F. Martin offered 12-string guitars during the early part of the century when other makers were selling them. Yet it was Gibson that led the way for the re-emergence of this instrument when it issued the B45-12 model in 1961. And in 1963, two Gibson 12-string guitars were prominently featured on the Rooftop Singers' release 'Walk Right In'. The song, a remake of an old Gus Cannon Jug Band tune, became a big hit. And the guitar licks on that record soon became almost synonymous with the 12-string.

Almost overnight folksingers throughout the nation were eager to add the sound of a 12-string guitar to their instrumental arsenal. On the heels of Gibson's announcement of the brand new B45-12 guitar, Martin decided to offer a 12-string model. Others followed. By 1966, Gibson, Martin, Harmony, Guild and Goya were all selling 12-string guitars as fast as they could build them. The 12-string guitar had entered the mainstream. When not playing his famous long-necked banjo, Pete Seeger relied heavily on the use of the 12-string. He even wrote an instructional manual on how to play the instrument in the style of Leadbelly. Other folk performers like Mark Spoelstra, Gordon Lightfoot and Leo Kottke, as well as rock groups such as the Byrds, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones soon relied on the unique sound of the 12-string guitar. The instrument is not quite as popular today as in the late 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless in today's market, nearly every major guitar manufacturer in the world makes at least one 12-string guitar model. ■

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Neil for all his hard work and dedication in highlighting this legendary brand of Schmidt-made instruments and wish him the best of luck in his future ventures.

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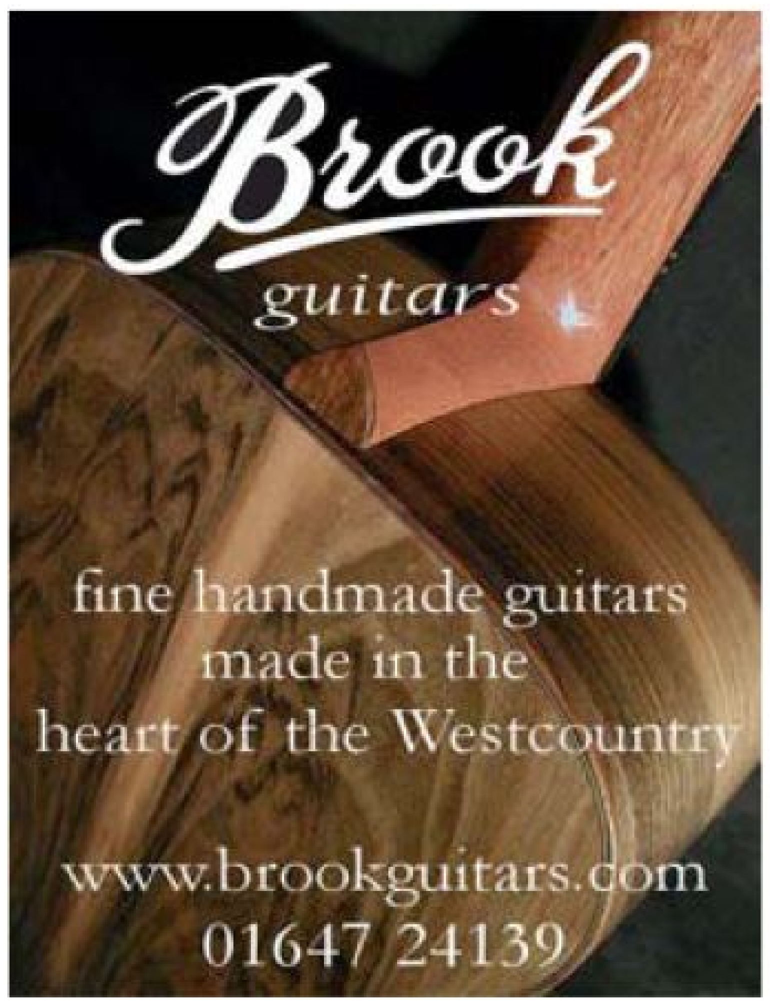

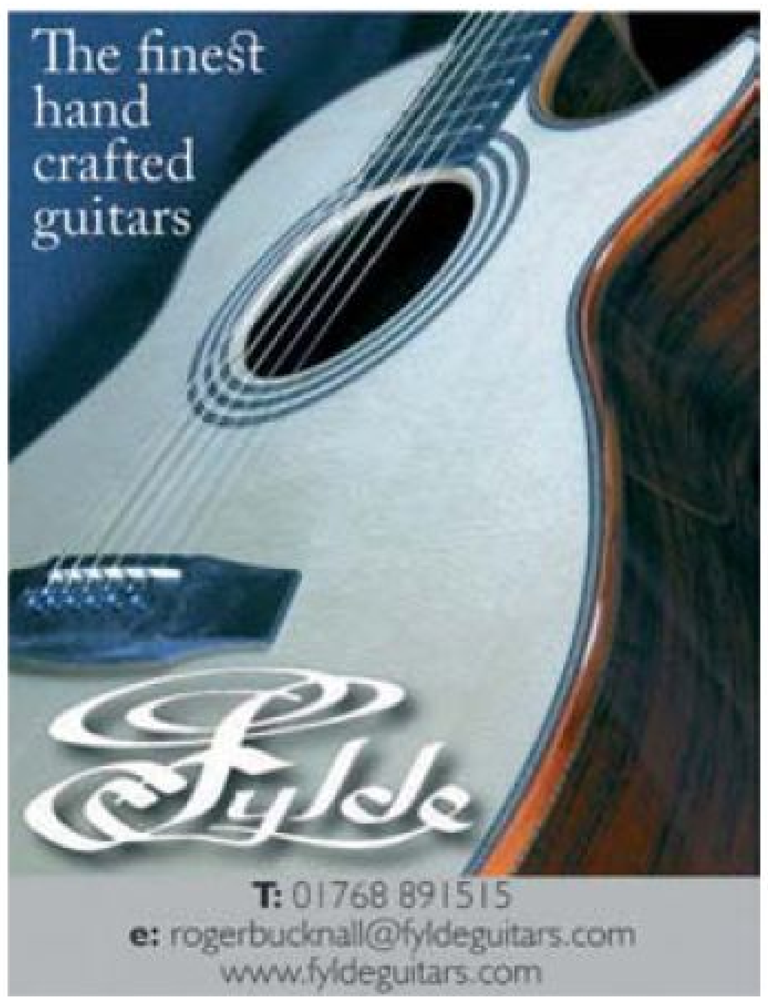

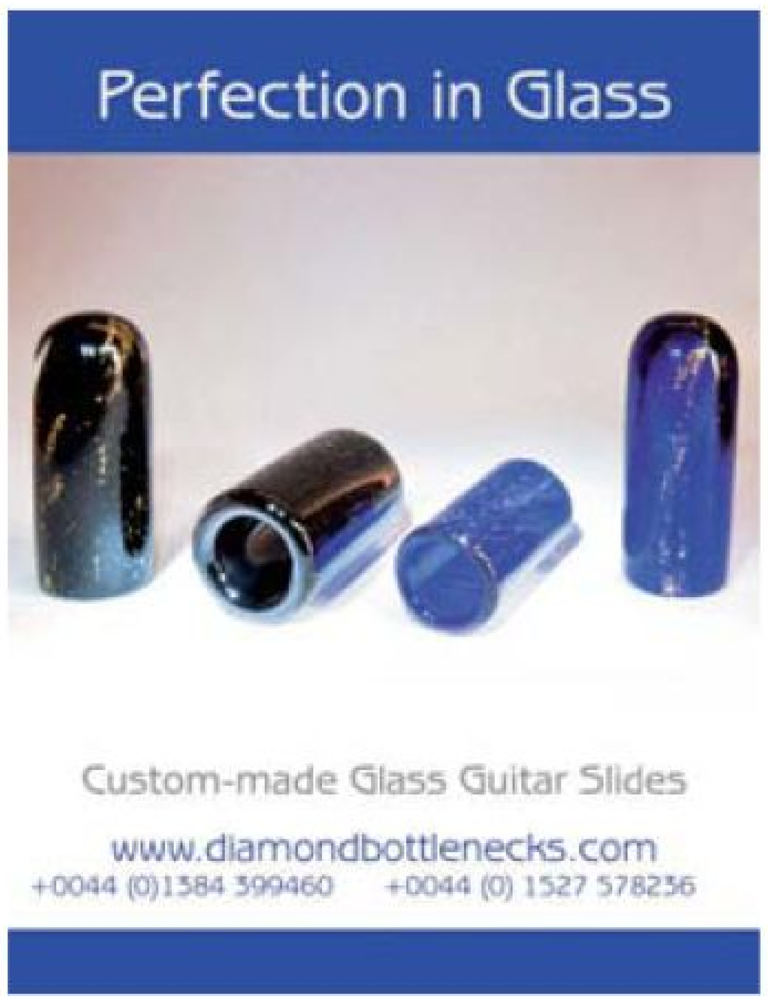

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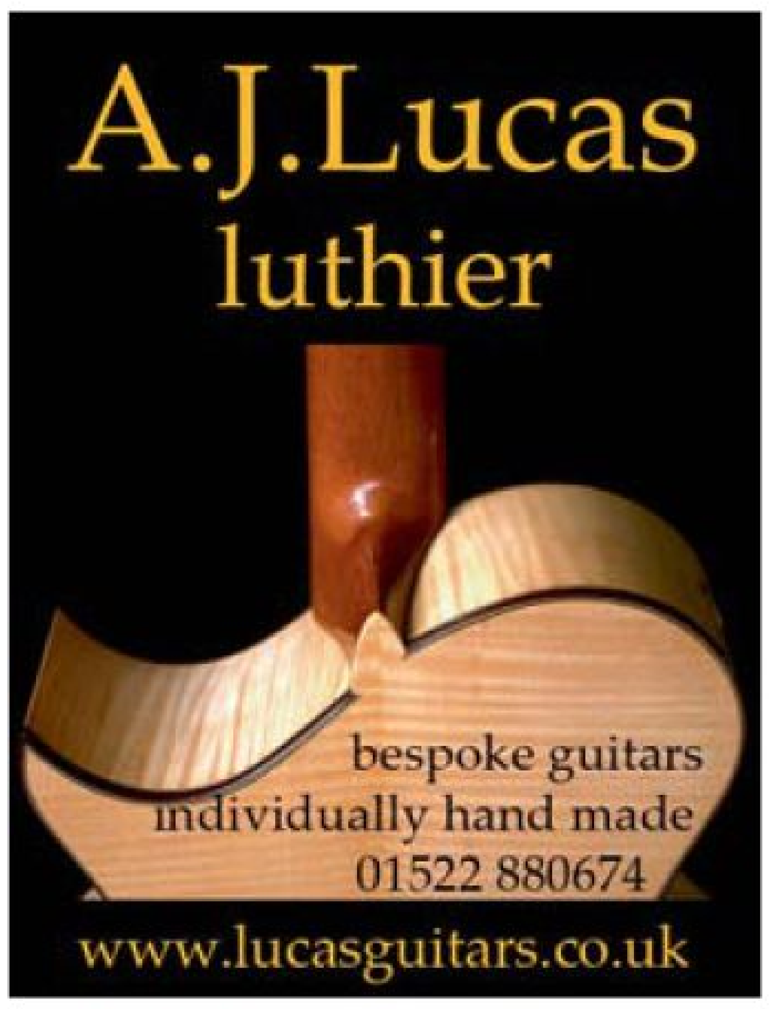

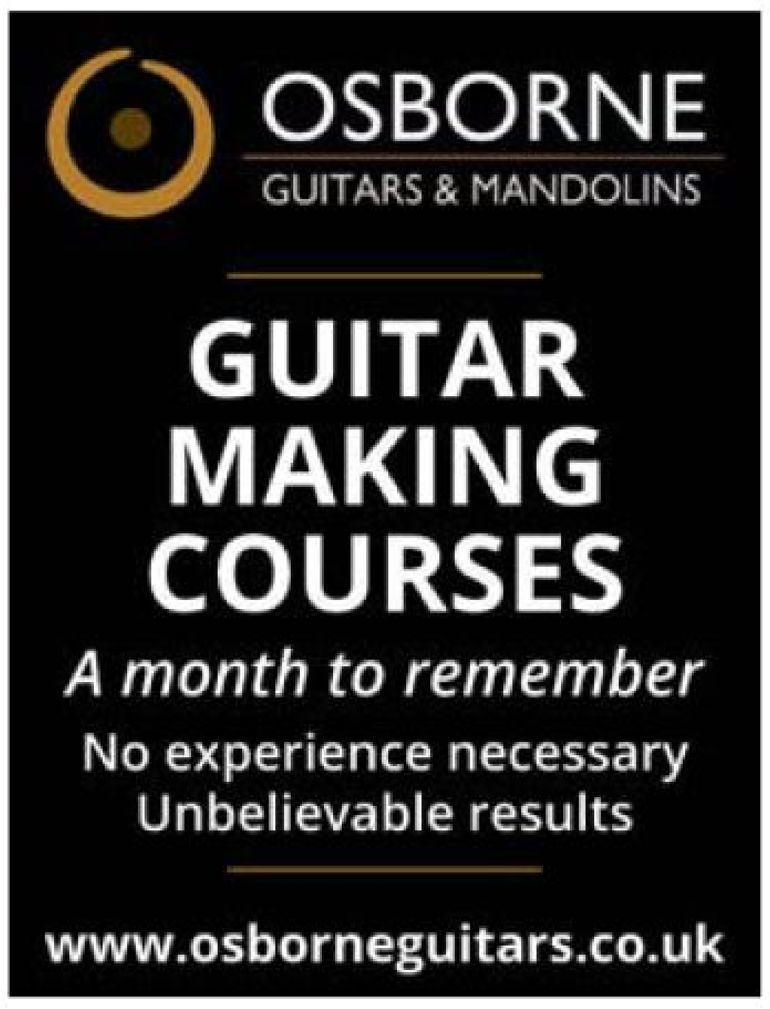

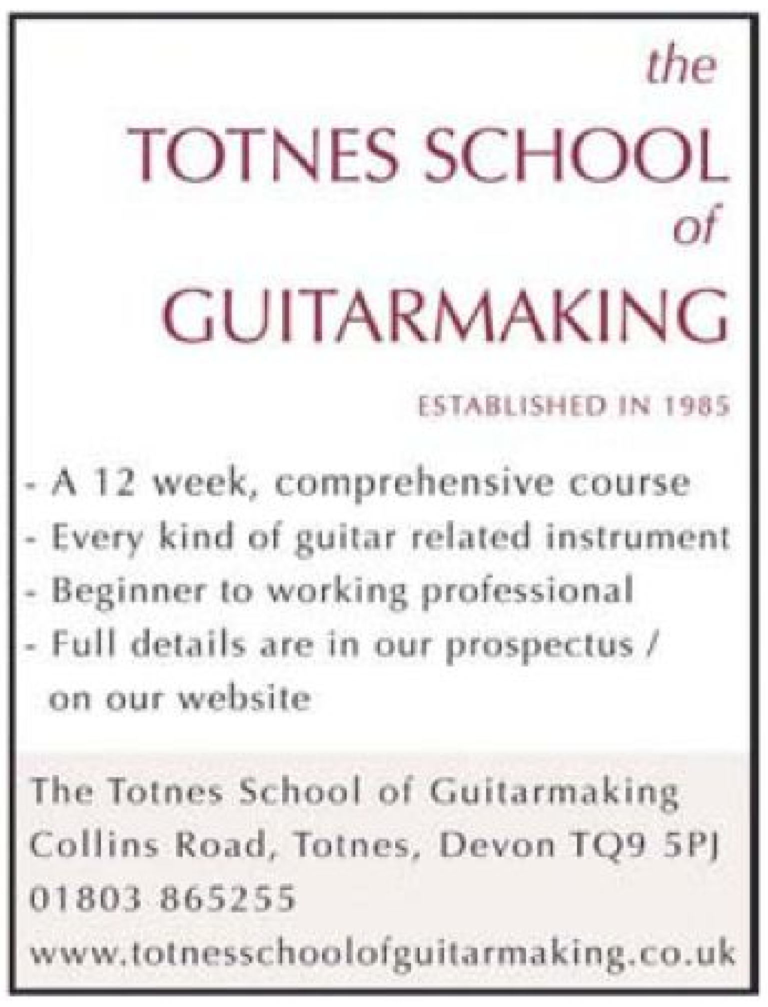

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BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

WORDS: TERI SACCONE **IMAGE:** TAKAHIRO KYONO

If you only know Bruce Springsteen for his bombastic rock then you're just getting half the story. The fact is, Springsteen is also one of the most definitive acoustic folk singer-songwriters of the past 40 years.

Born in 1949 in Freehold, New Jersey to a bus driver father (whose presence would resonate through his son's lyrics) and a secretary mother, Springsteen didn't grow up in a musical or even particularly cultural household. In fact, Bruce was indoctrinated into rock when he saw Elvis Presley's culturally galvanising appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956. Although he received a guitar in his formative years, Bruce didn't immerse himself in its magic until age 14. His first band was the Beatles-esque Castiles, who he joined in high school and who gigged locally. Next up was the hard rocking Earth, who also frequented clubs around the Jersey Shore, with players who would eventually play with Bruce when he formed his own band (including guitarist Steve Van Zandt). Eventually, Bruce started playing solo shows in New York and this is where he was spotted and signed to a record deal in 1972. He released several albums that honed his songwriting chops and heightened his profile as a live act, but it was the landmark *Born To Run* (1975) that broke things wide open commercially. The late 70s were his proving ground artistically and as a live act of incredible depth and fervour.

By 1982, the year that Springsteen made his lo-fi masterpiece *Nebraska*, he was a global superstar whose star would only rise further during the decade. Although touches of folk music ran through his catalogue – he is an unabashed fan of Woody Guthrie, Dylan, Seeger, Tom Chapin – Bruce largely wielded an electric guitar for most of his recorded material up to that point.

So when *Nebraska* appeared, it blind-sided many fans with its sparse, bleak sound and lyrics. Critics loved it, though the label had taken a big risk releasing it as it was such a departure from the rockier genius of *Darkness On The Edge of Town*, which preceded it.

It should be noted that *Nebraska* is a collection of demos, recorded on a four-track porta-studio, but for some, that sonic rawness only adds to its appeal. With its dark themes and lyrics depicting local hoodlums and mass killing sprees, *Nebraska* is decidedly not a life-affirming slice of American pie. Mostly comprised of an acoustic guitar along with harmonica and vocals, it laid bare the desolate landscape that could be seen in America's heartland. Bruce was no longer in the 'Promised Land', instead finding himself in a bleak post-industrial America – and the lyrics are suitably imbued with that hopelessness and isolation. Aside from *Tunnel of Love* this is probably his most personal album. It certainly is his most minimal yet most timeless, due to the stylistic nature of folk.

Tunnel of Love (1987) also contained noteworthy acoustic-centric tracks such as 'Cautious Man' and 'Two Faces', both of which would sit nicely alongside those on *Nebraska*.

In 2008, Springsteen released *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, his first album of covers in his career and, obviously, an album full of folk tunes popularised by Pete Seeger himself. Recorded as a live album with no rehearsals, *We Shall Overcome* energises the folk format with powerful takes on these traditional songs. A big part of the equation here is the large, frothy folk band (13 musicians that he brought in to record the standards). Ultimately, *We Shall Overcome* triumphs as a reboot of what some may view as sombre Seeger originals.

Revved up, raring to go, relevant: those were the words that described both that album and Bruce himself. An eternal musician if there ever was one. ■

Artist: James Gillett - **Mallory Knox**

Photo courtesy of: Tom Leishman

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